



CANADIAN PAINTERS

IN A
MODERN
WORLD

1925–1955

WRITINGS AND RECONSIDERATIONS

LORA SENECHAL CARNEY

Canadian Painters in a Modern World, 1925–1955

MCGILL-QUEEN'S/BEAVERBROOK CANADIAN FOUNDATION
STUDIES IN ART HISTORY

Martha Langford and Sandra Paikowsky, series editors

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Canadian Painters in a Modern World,
1925–1955
Writings and Reconsiderations
Lora Senechal Carney





Canadian Painters in a Modern World, 1925–1955

**Writings and
Reconsiderations**

Lora Senechal Carney

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To
Daniel Robert Carney and Julia Emma Carney and their families

and to the memory of

Dora Emma Erdman Senechal and Marvin William Daniel Senechal



Non-Combatants.

By Fritz Brandtner

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List of Canadian Artists Named in This Book

Akeektashook (Akeektashuk)
1898–1954

Louis Archambault 1915–2003
Miluqtuarjuk Arnaqquq

Caven Atkins 1907–2000

Marcel Barbeau 1925–2016

Conyers Barker (Ernest Conyers
Barker) 1909–2003

Maxwell Bates 1906–1980

Aba Bayefsky 1923–2001

Jack Beder 1910–1987

Frederic M. Bell-Smith 1846–1923

Louis Belzile 1929–

Alexandre Bercovitch 1891–1951

Norman Bethune 1890–1939

André Biéler 1896–1989

B.C. Binning 1909–1976

Ronald Bloore 1925–2009

Bruno Bobak 1923–2012

Paul-Émile Borduas 1905–1960

Sam Borenstein 1908–1969

Mary Bouchard (Simone Mary
Bouchard) 1912–1945

Fritz Brandtner 1896–1969

Miller Brittain 1912–1968

Bertram Brooker 1888–1955

Leonard Brooks 1911–2011

Robert Bruce 1911–1980

Jack Bush 1909–1977

Oscan Cahén 1916–1956

Ghitta Caiserman (Ghitta Caiserman-
Roth from 1962) 1923–2005

Emily Carr 1871–1945

Roland-H. Charlebois (Roland-
Hérard Charlebois) 1906–1965

Paraskeva Clark 1898–1986

Alex Colville (Alexander Colville)
1920–2013

Charles Comfort (Charles Fraser
Comfort) 1900–1994

Bruno Cormier 1919–1991

Stanley Cosgrove 1911–2002

Rody Kenny Hammond (Rody Kenny
Courtice from 1926) 1891–1973

Marie-Alain Couturier, O.P.
1897–1954

Maurice Cullen 1866–1934

Alma Duncan 1917–2004

Henry Eveleigh 1909–1999

Barker Fairley 1887–1986

Roger Fauteux 1923–

Marcelle Ferron 1924–2001

Orville Fisher 1911–1999

L.L. FitzGerald (Lionel LeMoine
FitzGerald) 1890–1956

Marc-Aurèle Fortin 1888–1970

Lillian Freiman 1908–1986

Helen Kemp Frye 1910–1986

Denyse Gadbois 1921–

Louise Gadbois 1896–1985

Clarence Gagnon 1881–1942

Claude Gauvreau 1925–1971

Pierre Gauvreau 1922–2011

Eric Goldberg 1890–1969

Charles Goldhamer 1903–1985

Paul Goranson 1911–2002

Hortense Gordon (Hortense M.
Gordon) 1889–1961

Josephine Hambleton (Josephine
Hambleton Tessier) 1919–2012

Lawren Stewart Harris 1885–1970

Julien Hébert 1917–1994

- Gilles Hénault 1920–1996
 Prudence Heward 1896–1947
 Bess Housser (Bess Housser Harris from 1934) 1890–1969
 James Houston 1921–2005
 E.J. Hughes 1913–2007
 Jack Humphrey (Jack Weldon Humphrey) 1901–1967
 Leonard Hutchinson 1896–1980
 Laurence Hyde 1914–1987
 Sheepa Ishulutaq
 Gershon Iskowitz 1921–1988
 A.Y. Jackson (Alexander Young Jackson) 1882–1974
 Donald Jarvis (Don Jarvis) 1923–2001
 Lucy Jarvis 1896–1985
 Jauran (Rodolphe de Repentigny) 1926–1959
 C.W. Jefferys (Charles W. Jefferys) 1869–1951
 Jean-Paul Jérôme 1928–2004
 Alphonse Jongers 1872–1945
 Anne Kahane 1924–
 Paul Kane 1810–1871
 Sybil Kennedy 1899–1986
 Kopeekolok (Qoperqualu) 1916–2004
 Cornelius Krieghoff 1815–1872
 Molly Lamb (Molly Lamb Bobak from 1945) 1922–2014
 Fernand Leduc 1916–2014
 Ozias Leduc 1864–1955
 Agnès Lefort 1895–1973
 Jean Paul Lemieux 1904–1990
 Rita Letendre 1928–
 Arthur Lismer 1885–1969
 Kenneth Lochhead 1926–2006
 Alexandra Luke (also known as Margaret McLaughlin from 1928) 1901–1967
 John Lyman 1886–1967
 J.E.H. MacDonald (James Edward Herve Macdonald) 1873–1932
 Jock Macdonald (J.W.G. Macdonald) 1897–1960
 Arthur McKay (Art McKay) 1926–2000
 Gordon MacNamara 1910–2006
 Joanasie Maniapik 1936–2007
 Henri Masson 1907–1996
 Harry Mayerovitch 1910–2004
 Yvonne McKague (Yvonne McKague Housser from 1935) 1898–1986
 Norman McLaren 1914–1987
 Doris Heustis Mills (Doris Heustis Mills Spiers from 1939) 1894–1989
 David Milne 1882–1953
 Guido Molinari 1933–2004
 Jean-Paul Mousseau 1927–1991
 Louis Muhlstock 1904–2001
 Munamee (Mannumi Shaqu) 1917–2000
 Kathleen Munn 1887–1974
 James Wilson Morrice 1865–1924
 Liliass Torrance Newton 1896–1980
 Ernst Neumann 1907–1956
 Pegi Nicol (Pegi Nicol MacLeod from 1936) 1904–1949
 Taina Nowdlak
 Levi Nutaralaaq 1937–
 Oshweetuk (Osuitok Ipeelee) 1923–2005
 Jean Palardy 1905–1991
 Alfred Pellán 1906–1988
 Maurice Perron 1924–1999
 Nathan Petroff (Paul Petroff) 1915–2007
 Joe Plaskett 1918–2014
 Towkie Qappik
 Leah Qaqqasiq 1935–

George Agnew Reid 1860–1947
 Moe Reinblatt (Moses Reinblatt)
 1917–1979
 Samuel Reindorf 1914–1988
 Louise Renaud 1922–
 Jeanne Rhéaume 1915–2000
 Jean-Paul Riopelle 1923–2002
 Goodridge Roberts 1904–1974
 Robert Roussil 1925–2013
 Yvonne Roy
 Carl Schaefer 1903–1995
 Marian Dale Scott 1906–1993
 Jack Shadbolt 1909–1998
 Ellen Simon 1916–2011
 Jori Smith 1907–2005
 Dorothy Stevens 1888–1966
 Françoise Sullivan 1925–
 Philip Surrey 1910–1990
 Edna Taçon 1913–1980
 F.B. Taylor (Frederick B. Taylor)
 1906–1987
 Tom Thomson 1877–1917
 Tikketuk: possibly Isaac Takatak
 1930–
 Jacques de Tonnancour 1917–2005
 Fernand Toupin 1930–2009
 Harold Town 1924–1990
 Tungeelik (Mark Tungilik)
 1913–1986
 Ina D.D. Uhthoff 1889–1971
 Frederick Horsman Varley (F.H.
 Varley) 1881–1969
 Rosie Veevee 1933–2012
 Guy Viau 1920–1971
 Lowrie Warrener 1900–1983
 Gordon Webber 1909–1965
 Elizabeth Wyn Wood 1903–1966

List of Pre-1960 Writers on Art Named in This Book

Walter Abell 1897–1956
Robert Ayre 1900–1980
Clive Bell 1881–1964
Norman Bethune 1890–1939
Salem Bland 1859–1950
Miller Brittain 1912–1968
Bertram Brooker 1888–1955
Donald Buchanan 1908–1966
Emily Carr 1871–1945
Sheldon Cheney 1886–1980
Paraskeva Clark 1898–1986
Charles Comfort (Charles Fraser
Comfort) 1900–1994
Marie-Alain Couturier, O.P.
1897–1954
Charles Doyon (Jean-Charles Doyon)
1905–1966
Dr Paul Dumas 1910–2005
Robert Élie 1915–1973
Barker Fairley 1887–1986
Rémi-Paul Forgues 1926–2012
Roger Fry 1866–1934
Helen Kemp Frye 1910–1986
Northrop Frye 1912–1991
Maurice Gagnon 1912–1999
Madeleine Gariépy
Claude Gauvreau 1925–1971
Pierre Gauvreau 1922–2011
Henri Girard
John Grierson 1898–1972
Josephine Hambleton (Josephine
Hambleton Tessier) 1919–2012
Lawren Stewart Harris 1885–1970
Jean-Charles Harvey 1891–1967
Julien Hébert 1917–1994
François Hertel (Rodolphe Dubé)
1905–1985
Frederick Housser (F.B. Housser)
1889–1936
James Houston 1921–2005
Alan Jarvis (Alan Hepburn Jarvis)
1915–1972
Fernand Leduc 1916–2014
Agnès Lefort 1895–1973
Alexandra Luke (also known as
Margaret McLaughlin from 1928)
1901–1967
John Lyman 1886–1967
Jock Macdonald (J.W.G. Macdonald)
1897–1960
Lawrence Mason 1882–1939
Pearl McCarthy 1895–1964
Graham McInnes (G. Campbell
McInnes) 1912–1970
Marshall McLuhan 1911–1980
Wilfred Gordon Mills 1886–1960
David Milne 1882–1953
Guido Molinari 1933–2004
Ernst Neumann 1907–1956
Pegi Nicol (Pegi Nicol MacLeod
from 1936) 1904–1949
Marcel Parizeau 1898–1945
Thérèse Renaud 1927–2005
Françoise de Repentigny
Rodolphe de Repentigny (who
painted under the name of Jauran)
1926–1959
Reynald (Ephrem-Réginald Bertrand)
1905–1965
Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau
1912–1943
Fernande Saint-Martin 1927–
Jehanne Bietry Salinger 1897–1996
Jack Shadbolt 1909–1998

Françoise Sullivan 1925–
F.B. Taylor (Frederick B. Taylor)
1906–1987
Jacques de Tonnancour 1917–2005
Frank Underhill 1889–1971
Guy Viau 1920–1971
Kenneth Wells (Kenneth McNeill
Wells) 1905–1988
Elizabeth Wyn Wood 1903–1966

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Every effort has been made to find copyright holders, to obtain their permission for the use of copyright material, and to credit them appropriately. I will welcome any notice of errors or omissions in this regard so that I can make corrections in subsequent editions.

A Note on the Text

With a very few exceptions, the endnotes in this book are used only for the citation of sources. The endnotes reflect the vastness of my debt to art scholars who have studied aspects of this period and its artists.

The footnotes scattered throughout the book identify terms and names and provide details not commonly known or easily found in other books on art. I have assumed that readers have a basic familiarity with the best-known Western artists and artistic movements, or can easily look them up.

A WORD ON TRANSLATIONS FROM THE FRENCH

The translations of brief quotes are mine. The translators of the documents in each chapter are acknowledged in footnotes to the document titles. Most translations are by Lola Lemire Tostevin; others are by Ray Ellenwood and Ersy Contogouris. I owe them all many thanks.

Preface

This book is an exploration of the writings of Canadian artists and their critics as seen against three turbulent decades. It is a gathering of evidence of their perspectives on the issues that mattered to them, and of specific connections among art, politics, and society.

For this project, which grew out of a fascination with artists' and critics' writings that long preceded my career as an art historian, I read thousands of letters, private journals, Canadian newspaper and magazine articles and reviews, and other published and unpublished texts from the mid-twenties to the mid-fifties. My study of these writings was an attempt both to see from within an author's field of vision and to step outside it and take a critical position. Wherever possible I read the published texts in their original periodicals rather than among clippings in artists' files, since it was useful to know the periodicals' ideological bents, obvious or subtle. The periodicals were usually intended for particular audiences, and a writer will naturally say certain things to some audiences and not to others. This part of the exercise also led to a search for as much information as I could find about the periodicals and their editors. The annotated list of periodicals in the bibliography is a partial outcome of this search.

Studying the documents I had gathered, I looked for the major themes, the most significant debates, the especially powerful and far-reaching statements.

As I read I discovered two striking shifts of perspective: one in 1939, when the Depression ended and the Second World War began, and the other in the late forties with the onset of the postwar economic boom, the Cold War, and the settling into people's consciousness of the presence of the atomic bomb. These two shifts were anything but complete, but they stood out enough to require a structure that reflected them. I chose clusters of artists' and critics' writings that, in addressing important themes, were at least sometimes directly related to these shifts. For each cluster of writings I constructed for myself long timelines, detailing all the relevant facts I had about the artists and critics involved and about related writings, local contexts, and world events. These timelines in turn opened up new connections and correspondences. Certain narrative lines emerged, and among them I looked for the ones that best captured the fundamental points made by the artists and critics. I wrote the narratives, combined them with the clusters of documents, and arrived at eight quite separate "chapters" of an unusual but satisfying character. I finished off each chapter with a sort of road map that precedes the documents and explains my choices.

The use of narrative allowed me to put each of the writings into its own *moment*, and to show how ideas changed as contexts changed. It provided a strong structure

for lacing together whole networks of detail about the artists' lives, their supporters and opponents, and the events in their worlds. In turn, these networks of detail reach across the chapters and join with the work of a great many other art historians in constructing a larger history of Canadian art during these decades of conflict and crisis.

Of course, no history is objective. The literary theorist Ondřej Sládek observed that writers of historical narratives construct worlds "filled with places, objects, characters and relations between and among them" just like writers of fiction; and although the historian tries to tell the truth, every historical world is "*incomplete and full of gaps* – just like fiction."¹ But within those limits, I have done my best to represent fairly the artists and critics and their lives and writings.

Although almost all of the authors of the documents I studied identified themselves as modern in one way or another, my intent has not been to define "modern" or "modernism" within Canadian art history or to apply contemporary theory to those terms, any more than it has been to do a detailed study of paintings. My interest is to understand the specific ways in which artists and critics used the terms in their own contexts.

The business of context is a complex one. As the cultural studies scholar Nikos Papastergiadis reminds us, we can no longer define context "as if it possessed a singular set of national traits that are forged in an exclusive setting over a sustained period of time, nor is it sufficient to identify the primacy of formal concerns. Rather, the concept of context is more meaningful if it includes a multi-temporal engagement with the past and the present, a cosmopolitan vision of the cultural horizon, and a specific engagement with social realities."² That is what I have attempted. I look at the writings as reflections of a fast-moving modern world and its crises, and the ideas behind the writings as never merely derivative of Europe in spite of self-conscious ties to European artistic currents.

There were many forms of modernism in Canada as elsewhere, and, as you will see, each form tended to construct its own history; that is an aspect of its specificity. It must be said that in constructing such a history, the production of other cultures was often appropriated without acknowledgment or understanding of its meanings, and in Canada, this amounted to a form of colonialism in relation to Native cultures. The writers of the late twenties and thirties did not provide a critique of that practice. They generally wrote from a primitivist perspective: Native cultures were said to be disappearing and could thus be situated in a timeless past, to be used as desired to give a sense of a national heritage or to show that academic education and "professionalism" were irrelevant to great art.³ As Gerta Moray noted so aptly, Emily Carr's work has "provided the flashpoint for recurring controversies"⁴ in this respect, especially in relation to the 1927 National Gallery *Exhibition of West Coast Art – Native and Modern*, and in the chapter on Carr you will find citations for that literature. Louise Vigneault shows that French Canadian as well as English Canadian art writers joined the primitivist discourse: "Primi-

tivism then has the advantage of defining a certain dimension of French Canadian modernity, nevertheless without proposing models that are too experimental and without sacrificing local imperatives ... In fact it responds to the double need to be rooted in a distant past and to be part of a universalist philosophy.”⁵

There were of course other, more positive aspects to the construction of modernist histories. While European artists in varying configurations were central to these constructions, artists from elsewhere, together with music, literature, and a great variety of theories of art, were brought in. So, the specific creative ancestries of artists as they and their critics constructed them differed greatly, and in ways that said much about them, as you will see.



The first few chapters of the book show how, in the late twenties and early thirties, the isolation felt earlier in the century by Canadian artists with modernist convictions began to be replaced by an atmosphere of support, however thin. Although this began to happen in a number of cities, it was true especially in Toronto and Montreal, which were very much the centres of art and publishing until after the Second World War. The cultural historian Andrew Nurse explains the change in sociological terms, using the concept of an “artistic field,” which he based on his reading of the German sociologist-philosopher Jürgen Habermas. An artistic field is a set of ideological and institutional relations that establishes and upholds “specific value structures and the social relations that follow from them,”⁶ with constantly shifting connections to a larger social context. The modern artistic field “increasingly linked art to a self-referential aesthetic,” and competed with an earlier field that “linked art to ‘elevated’ elite pursuits.”⁷ The modern artistic field, Nurse says, rose in Canada in the twenties when government institutions began to supplant free market practices with their own privileging of the nationalist Group of Seven painters, and as a consequence “aesthetics – as opposed to the market – became a key to value.”⁸ Nurse’s overarching framework may only interpret history to a certain point, but it is a useful thing to keep in mind since the valuing of aesthetics went on to become a force far beyond the influence of state institutions as new exhibiting societies, new critics, and new artistic practices became established. All of this affected the question of how, or whether, an artist should address the extreme political, economic, and social realities of the era.



In 1930, the artist-writer Bertram Brooker remarked in his newspaper column “The Seven Arts” that Canadian art was beginning to “bear a closer relationship to the modern movement in other countries” because a growing group of artists was now emphasizing “form.” This emphasis on form is exactly what the modernist critics Roger Fry and Clive Bell regarded as the legacy Cézanne left in carrying out his famous wish to make something solid and enduring out of impressionism, like the

art of the museums. Since Brooker offers such a useful distinction between the nationalistic Group of Seven landscape painting of the twenties and a growing “third movement” – a “movement” far more open to the larger world and its social and political realities – I take you into the book with an excerpt from his column:

The change ... signifies a break with the landscape obsession that has dominated un-academic painting for ten or fifteen years, and academic painting for forty or fifty years before that. The human figure, so long neglected, except by a few orthodox portrait painters, will again become a subject – has already done so, in fact – of interest to Canadian artists. This will mean, more, I think, than the mere multiplication of figure paintings. It should produce an approach to every kind of subject, landscape included, that will be different from either the academic or the Group approach. In a word, by placing emphasis on “form” instead of on “atmosphere” (which was the academic obsession) or on “rhythm” (which was the Group of Seven obsession) the third movement in Canadian painting will inevitably bear a closer relationship to the modern movement in other countries.⁹

Canadian Painters in a Modern World, 1925–1955

Lawren Stewart Harris, Europe, and the Bodhisattva in the Next Room

1

As a Canadian almost ferociously patriotic, with a great feeling for the country, which has been greatly bolstered by Whitman, hesitating to go to Europe or even New York for fear of being seduced from his utterly native viewpoint. Everything new is going to happen in this country ... He feels himself in the vanguard of the movement and is looking for every sign ... He hates Europe and is impatient with slavish admiration of anything that emanates from there.

Bertram Brooker

In 1925 when the artist-writer Bertram Brooker made these notes on a fictional character “something like” his friend Lawren Stewart Harris, Harris was in the prime of his career, painting mostly northern Ontario and Rocky Mountain landscapes and spending three months or more each year camping in those regions.¹ He exhibited with the Group of Seven, who by this time had national and international critical support, and he was known as their unofficial leader. In Toronto, where he lived in wealth and high society with his family, he had recently given his first solo exhibition, published what has been described as “Canada’s first book of urban modernist free verse,”² written articles and reviews for the *Canadian Forum* and the *Canadian Bookman*, and joined the *Forum*’s editorial committee.

Scholars have shown with thoroughness and insight that in the complicated and sometimes contradictory essays that Lawren Harris wrote and published, he wove together nationalism, art, and spiritual progress in ways that involved distancing Canada and sometimes all of North America from Europe.³ In the interest of adding a new perspective, I am focusing on what *exactly* Harris was saying about Europe, and on a striking change in his attitude toward Europe. This not only reveals something about the ideas of an English Canadian cultural leader who was central to a romantic tradition in English Canadian art: on a much broader level, it reflects the momentous shifts in relations among countries in these years.

I begin with Harris’s review, published in the April 1925 *Canadian Forum*, of the book *Mahatma Gandhi* by Romain Rolland, the French pacifist and Nobel Prize-winning novelist and essayist. Harris started by praising Gandhi’s spirituality and non-violent policies and comparing Gandhi to Christ, probably to draw in the magazine’s mostly Protestant English Canadian readers. But then he contrasted Gandhi’s policies provocatively with “our Western way of national aggrandizement, the present-day heritage of a perverse Europe, turning religion into an endorsement of conquest and cruelty and hate.” In setting Gandhi and Europe as moral opposites in this way, Harris actually took some of the nuances out of Rolland’s argument and

was, however, naturally a spiritual leader by the magical compelling force of a great love. Always he teaches non-violence, no-vengeance, non-resistance together with a willingness to suffer all things, as the one unconquerable attitude, and he has guided his people into such ways by pacific practical means as well as by spiritual instruction.

And here we have as contrast the so sad spectacle of an alien English people ruling India for their own ends, breaking pledges, fostering enmities, resorting to violence, to wholesale incarcerations, to the massacre of utterly defenceless people, for no other discoverable reason than a vague fear of losing something. And India tells them by words, and by lives lived in its exemplification, that nothing beautiful, nothing great or worthy of man, can possibly be won by violence, that life itself only becomes glorious as it is given to non-possessive, peaceful ends. Our Western way of national aggrandizement, the present-day heritage of a perverse Europe, turning religion into an endorsement of conquest and cruelty and hate, is indeed far removed from the ideals of Gandhi. His religious teachings and life inspire only patience, an active goodwill, and the beautiful courage of saintliness.

The contrast with western ways and thought is very marked all through the book, and should prove enlightening, even if we consider that the genius of the West requires a passage through materialism and industrialism for its unfolding. LAWREN HARRIS.

Fig. 1.1

Excerpt from Lawren S. Harris's review of Romain Roland's book *Mahatma Gandhi*, *Canadian Forum* 5, no. 25 (April 1925): 213.

made the contrast even starker. Not surprisingly, the review got at least one angry response. John D. Sinclair of Toronto, formerly with the Scottish Churches College in Calcutta (Kolkata), sent a letter to the *Forum* expressing his disappointment that the magazine would publish such a damning and indiscriminate judgment of “the Imperial Government in its greatest and most momentous and most difficult task.” The writer evidently had no idea what a British departure would mean, “especially for the politically dumb and helpless masses of India.” This arrogance gave Harris another opportunity to speak out, and his response is a further denouncement of Europe’s oppressive colonial policies.

Harris had by this time devoted himself to Theosophy, an international movement founded half a century earlier on teachings drawn from Eastern and Western spiritual and philosophical writings, and on the belief that it held the key to all religions.* For Theosophists, the divine is the eternal, universal aspect of the human being, and one must endlessly struggle toward it. Theosophy led Harris to what Northrop Frye called “a commitment to painting as a way of life, or, perhaps better, as a sacramental activity expressing a faith, and so analogous to the practicing of a religion” – a romantic pursuit, in Frye’s view.⁴ There is a connection here to the philosopher Charles Taylor’s ideas on the romantic, which he sees not as a period but as the development of a “social imaginary” that goes back centuries, and continues forward to the present. To Taylor, the romantic search for an “ethic of authenticity”⁵ required those who had abandoned orthodoxy to fall back on their own internal resources and accept both the vulnerability and the freedom that result. When Taylor says that the “modern cosmic imaginary” opened up “a space in which people can wander between and around” all kinds of spirituality and/or materialism, he speaks of just such movements as Theosophy.⁶ In fact, of those who followed alternate religions, Theosophists were especially free to wander: it was their task to find their own ways through the movement’s vast writings, since it had no official priests or

* The religious studies scholar Gillian McCann has pointed out in “A Pilgrim Forever: The Life and Thought of Albert Smythe” (185–6) that Theosophy was far from being an oddity in pre-Second World War Canada and certain other countries; rather, it was one of several alternative spiritual practices that, taken together, were quite widespread, enough so that scholars no longer see modernity quite so simply as a turn toward the secular. These alternative practices provided an influential critique of industrial civilization and its dependence on the rational for solutions to twentieth-century problems.

gurus. Lawren Harris chose to read every day from a version of the Bhagavad Gita with commentary by William Quan Judge, a founder of the Theosophical Society and a hero to Harris.⁷

A year after his review of the Romain Roland book, Harris published “Revelation of Art in Canada” as the lead article for the 15 July 1926 issue of the *Canadian Theosophist*, and here as in the review, though less sharply, he distanced himself from Europe. In an often-quoted passage – and it is important to remember that he wrote this for Theosophists, who were used to such language – he declared that the “clear, replenishing, virgin north,” which apparently meant everything above the border cities,* provided a “spiritual flow that will ever shed clarity into the growing race of America.”⁸ This reflects a Theosophical belief that in North America a new “race” would develop (a spiritual race, though on this point some scholars interpret the writings otherwise,⁹ and some of the writings are ambiguous). Harris argued that Canadian artists understood the North better than anyone else and that their work was a result of having absorbed it; this gave them the courage to fight off “the insistent, distracting superficial emanations from older growths,” particularly from Europe, with its “weariness and consequent doubts and melancholy.”¹⁰ Harris does not suggest ignoring the great work of “all peoples,” since studying it can allow one to “turn to account here and now what we find will help us.” The point is rather to avoid *clinging* to it out of a sense of inferiority, for then “even the glory of the art of the ages gets between us and the creative life here and now.”¹¹ And, clinging to “superficial emanations” – the second-rate European art and artifacts and habits brought into Canada – was to Harris an even worse and more persistent problem. So, this essay was not a simplistic dismissal of Europe. On the other hand, he doesn’t mention Canadian artists’ enormous debt to Scandinavian painting, to impressionism in general, and to other European sources.¹² In his eagerness for an authentically Canadian art, those roots vanish.

“Revelation of Art in Canada” and Harris’s earlier review and letter in the *Forum* reflect the fact that he was, like Theosophists in general¹³ and certainly like those in Ireland and India, a promoter of the cultural autonomy of countries. His diction in “Revelation of Art in Canada” recalls the “anti-imperial geography” of the Irish Theosophist poet J.H. Cousins, who had moved to India to help with the Theosophical Society’s project of freeing the Indian educational system of its pervasively Eurocentric cultural biases.¹⁴ Cousins said in 1919 that education must constantly encourage “the declaration of one’s own temperamental and racial identity as a nation or individual,” even while recognizing the “universal Brotherhood”

* The North is whatever one imagines it to be, and it has been imagined a great many ways in Canadian arts and literature, as Sherrill Grace shows in her book *Canada and the Idea of North*, and Eric Kaufmann in his article “Naturalizing the Nation.” Lawren Harris never defines it, and we can only imagine what his sense of North is by considering the places where he travelled and painted.

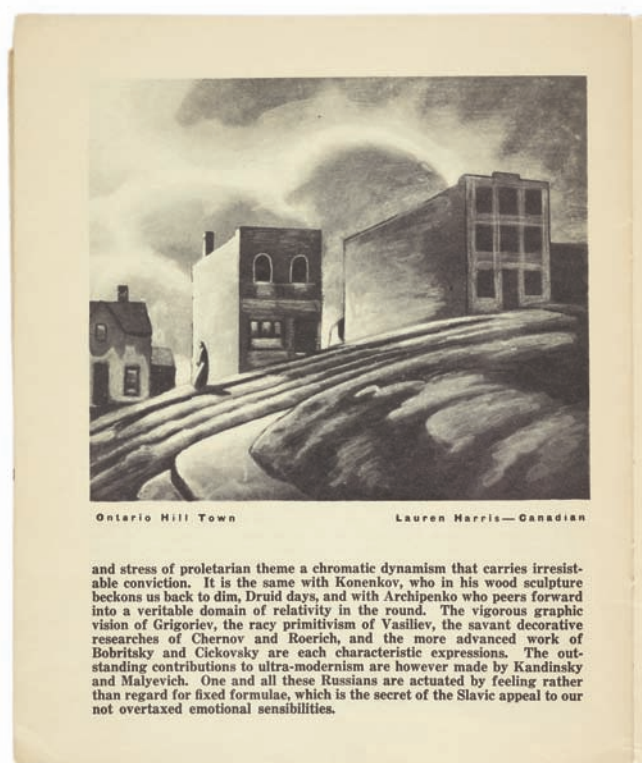
that was the first object of the international Theosophical Society.¹⁵ Similarly, Harris spoke in “Revelation of Art in Canada” and elsewhere of finding a national “idiom,” a face of the divine that was culturally specific but eternal in its essence.

Harris’s concept of cultural nation building was shared by other members of the Toronto Theosophical Society and especially its leader, the journalist Albert Smythe.¹⁶ There was enthusiasm in Smythe’s group for developing a Canadian cultural identity that was freed of Europe while remaining within a continentalism that echoed the perspective of Whitman;^{*17} and they felt that even though Canada had moved away a little from its colonial character, its people needed to complete the separation and embrace their own creativity. Boggled down in the past, a soul could not evolve, and Europe was the past.

It is a commonplace in the history of Canadian art to relate the work of the Group of Seven to a larger English Canadian pattern of nationalism, and Mary Vipond explored in her classic essay “The Nationalist Network” the increasing formalization of the connections among English Canadian nationalist intellectuals and artists – clubs, scholarly societies, journals – that supported the Group.¹⁸ But more broadly, nationalism after the First World War rose in relation to a shift away from Europe and toward the United States economically and politically, as Ramsay Cook showed in another classic essay, “Landscape Painting and National Sentiment in Canada.” That shift, which had been going on for decades, was greatly sped up by the First World War,¹⁹ and one reason Cook cites is a revulsion toward Europe over the brutality and terrible casualty rate of the war. People whose loved ones were killed, including Lawren Harris, who lost his brother, knew that brutality too well.

But Harris was about to see another side of Europe. In the spring of 1926 he had received his first international award, a silver medal at Philadelphia’s Sesqui-Centennial International Exposition, and only a month after he published “Revelation of Art in Canada” he got a letter from Katherine Dreier of New York requesting permission to include a painting of his in “the brochure on Modern Art, which we are issuing in connection with the Sesqui-Centennial.”²⁰ This “we” was the Société Anonyme, an artists’ network that she, as an abstract artist, social activist, and curator, had started together with the artists Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray in 1920 in order to promote contemporary European art through exhibitions, lectures, and publications. Dreier was planning its biggest project ever, a show at the Brooklyn Museum that would be the most up-to-the-minute, large-scale art exhibition that had ever appeared on the continent. Duchamp as well as Kandinsky, Mondrian, and other European artists were collecting works from many countries, and Katherine Dreier wanted Harris to send “two paintings in the same splendid

* Walt Whitman’s very boldness, his passion for the New World and for leaving the old behind, inspired many, and he was much admired as a model among the Group of Seven and their associates as well as among Theosophists. J.E.H. MacDonald called the preface to *Leaves of Grass* a declaration of independence for poets and artists (“An Artist’s View of Whitman,” a 1926 lecture, container 1, file 13, James Edward Hervey MacDonald fonds).



modern spirit in which your ‘Ontario Hills’ are painted” plus a biographical note for the catalogue of this artist-organized show.²¹ She also wanted help in finding a Canadian location, since the Art Gallery of Toronto and the National Gallery had turned her down.

So, in November 1926, Harris found himself the lone Canadian in the now-famous International Exhibition of Modern Art of the Société Anonyme, alongside more than a hundred Europeans and Americans, including Leger, Klee, Münter, Kandinsky, Miró, Mondrian, de Chirico, Picasso, and Braque.²² A great many of the paintings, sculptures, and photographs were highly abstract if not totally non-objective, and some of the artists, notably Kandinsky and Mondrian, would have shared Dreier’s conviction that abstraction led the way toward spiritual evolution, for they were Theosophists like her and Harris. Dreier’s rhetoric in relation to the show was very much in the romantic spirit of Kandinsky’s *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, a favourite text of hers, and of Harris’s. To Kandinsky, art was one of the purest expressions of a spiritual revolution that would carry humanity out of the darkness and chaos of modern materialism: the contemporary arts all have “the seed of a striving towards the abstract, the non-material.”²³

For an artist so keen to keep his theory straight, exhibiting with the Société Anonyme must have presented quite a problem. Harris had been unequivocal about the need to get clear of Europe, although as a long-time explorer of art and the spiritual he was drawn to European writings, especially Kandinsky’s *Concerning*

Figs. 1.2a and 1.2b

Cover and page 28, Christian Brinton, *Modern Art at the Sesqui-Centennial Exhibition*, 1926. Book: 27 × 22.2 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario, E.P. Taylor Research Library and Archives LA.127510 and LA.127510.1. Harris’s painting *Ontario Hill Town*, 1926 (86 × 103 cm) is now in University College, University of Toronto.

the Spiritual in Art and Clive Bell's *Art*.^{*24} But now his own painting hung with a whole sweep of European art, and that was a different matter. He might have chosen to let the moment pass quietly at home. But he did not.

Katherine Dreier had taken the time on opening day to write to Harris to say "how very handsome your two pictures look and how much your canvas called 'Mountain Forms'† has been admired."²⁵ Harris went to Brooklyn to see the show, and met Dreier. On returning home he sent her a copy of "Revelation of Art in Canada," explaining very carefully that the parts condemning European art really referred to the old-fashioned "cheap dregs" sold in Canada – in other words, not the contemporary work she cared so much about.²⁶ He also sent her a copy of Frederick Housser's new book *A Canadian Art Movement: The Story of the Group of Seven*, saying even more carefully that it represented the past and not the future: it was "the first book with a distinctly Canadian flavour – a feeling of national consciousness – now, a few of us move toward a universal consciousness"²⁷ (placing himself, perhaps, with such Toronto painters as Kathleen Munn and Lowrie Warrener, who in their own ways pursued art and the spiritual, and who, as Joyce Zemans explains, rejected nationalism in favour of a quest for universals).‡ This striking shift took Harris closer to the negotiated internationalism of some influential Theosophical thinkers, something like the more "fluid and flexible form of national identity" that the Irishman J.H. Cousins favoured.²⁸

Harris eventually managed to convince the "very timid crew" at the Art Gallery of Toronto that they should reverse their decision and bring in the Société Anonyme show,²⁹ and it hung in Toronto for three weeks in April 1927. Katherine Dreier wrote the introduction to the catalogue³⁰ and came to supervise the show's hanging, to give informal talks, and to present a public lecture attended by more than three hundred people. Lawren Harris also appeared in the gallery on scheduled days to take questions from the public, which made him the direct spokesman for vanguard European art.

More than ten thousand people saw the Toronto show altogether. The artist Doris Heustis Mills wrote to Katherine Dreier, whom she had met, that the show

* There are many references in this book to Clive Bell's *Art* and to Roger Fry's writings, especially *Vision and Design*. Though often spoken of together, these two British modernist critics had their differences. For Bell subject matter was irrelevant: only "significant form" mattered in art, that indefinable thing that makes a person experience "aesthetic emotion," and behind significant form was God, essential reality. To Fry, aesthetic emotion was important but subject matter still had value, as long as it didn't get in the way of formal considerations.

† A large painting (152 × 178 cm) from about 1926. Harris showed it again in the Royal Canadian Academy exhibition in Montreal in 1927, where it "occupied the centre of one wall. One wonderful cone filled with snow & serenely rising to the sky filled with wonderful light ... lower forms rose leading up to it purplish in color ... I wished I could sweep the rest of the wall bare" (Emily Carr, journal, early December 1927).

‡ Joyce Zemans mentions that most of the first generation of English Canadian non-objective painters, including Munn, Harris, and Brooker, read Clive Bell and Roger Fry, as well as the American Sheldon Cheney, whose 1924 book *Primer of Modern Art* was a popular account of international modernist ideas ("Abstract and Non-Objective Art in English Canada," 164).

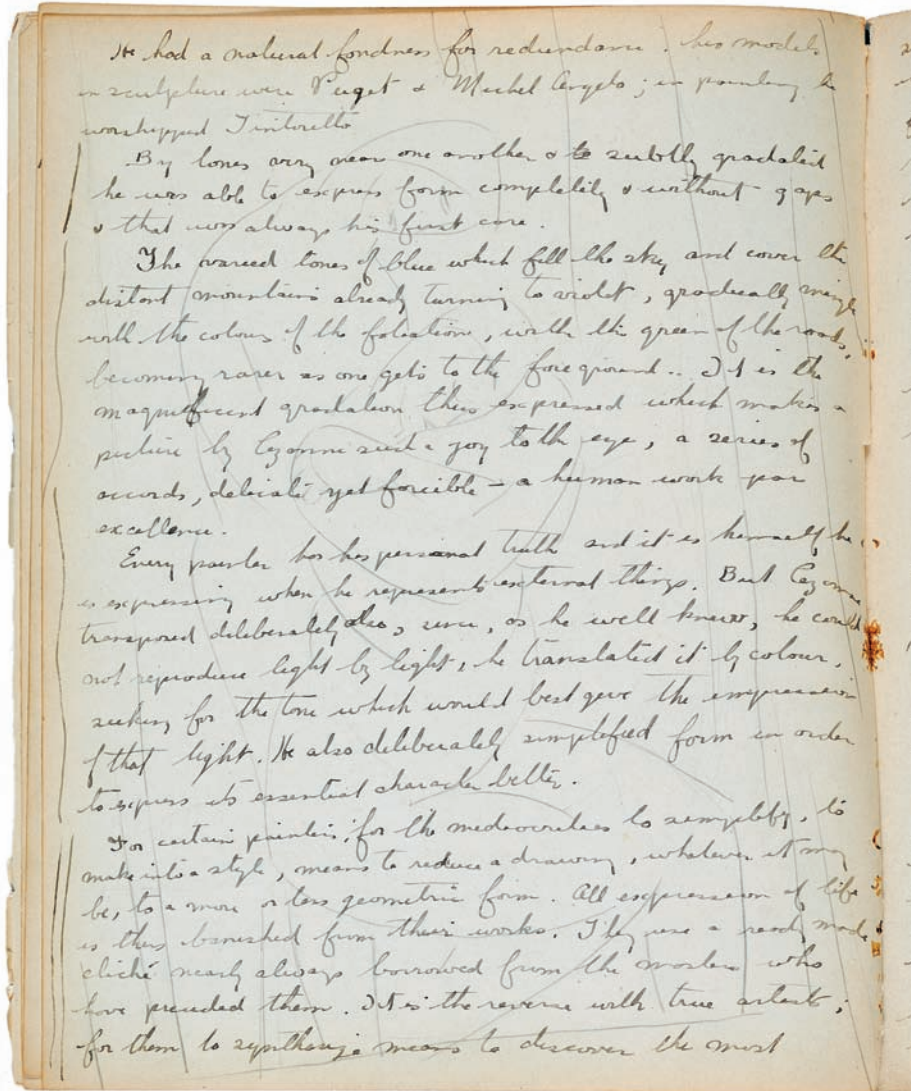


Fig. 1.3

Kathleen Munn, page from Notebook 7, 1921-26. Ink on paper, book: 25.8 × 20.6 × 1.7 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario, Gift of Lenore Richards, 2005. LA.KMF.S1.7.1 © Estate of Kathleen Munn. Kathleen Munn fonds.

Kathleen Munn was Canada's most advanced practitioner of modernist painting in the years just after the First World War and became part of a small circle of Toronto artists and intellectuals who explored abstraction. (For biographical details, see Uhlyarik, *Kathleen Munn: Life and Work*; Zemans et al., *Kathleen Munn and Edna Taçon*; Uhlyarik, "The Passion of Kathleen Munn," *The Logic of Nature*, 54-67; Getty, "Kathleen Munn and Lowrie Warrener: The Logic of Nature, the Romance of Space," *The Logic of Nature*.) By the mid-twenties she was making paintings from which the subject had disappeared entirely. She is believed to have given a talk at the Société Anonyme exhibition. Out of her occasional studies at New York's Art Students League, where her teachers included the cubist Max Weber, came nine notebooks dating from 1912 to the late twenties. These are filled with excerpts from books and articles on modern French art, art theory and criticism, design, philosophy, poetry, and literature. She reveals a special interest in space and colour theory and the writings of Roger Fry and Clive Bell, but followed her own artistic path in a quest for purity (Getty, "Kathleen Munn and Lowrie Warrener," 19-21 and 24-7; Uhlyarik, "The Passion of Kathleen Munn," 59-60). Cézanne's name appears often in the notebooks. Here is a page from the seventh, with quotes from a 1923 book about him: "every painter has his personal truth and it is himself he is expressing when he represents external things. But Cézanne transposed deliberately also" (Tristan L. Klingsor [pseud.], *Cézanne*, 1923). The page's notes are underlain by a beautiful drawing of a mother and child.

Fig. 1.4

Kathleen Munn, working drawing for Passion series, 1920s–1930s. 21 × 13.5 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario. Gift of Lenore Richards, 2005. LA.KMF.S3.14. © Estate of Kathleen Munn. Kathleen Munn fonds.

Munn shared Lawren Harris's quest for the universal, but unlike him she aligned herself with French thought and art. Into Notebook 6 (1920s), she copied a passage from Guillaume Apollinaire's *The Cubist Painters* that describes the fourth dimension as "the dimension of the infinite," and the post-Euclidian era as the time when "the art of the new painters takes the infinite universe as the ideal" (Guillaume Apollinaire, *Les peintres cubistes*, 1913).

This drawing shows Munn putting into practice her own intense study of geometry, infinite space, and movement. The Art Gallery of Ontario has many hundreds of her drawings, which, together with the nine notebooks, reveal a spectacular drawing talent. The eventual result of her work was the Passion series, described by her good friend Bertram Brooker in fall 1934 as "simply stupendous." "She is working in ink (although at a few feet it looks like pencil, so fine and pale are her lines) on paper that must be about 20 × 28. She has done so far a Crucifixion, an Ascension, an Assumption of the Virgin, an Agony in the Garden, a Last Supper, a Taking Down from the Cross and an Entombment. All the figures are nude and handled in what I can only call a cubistic style. They are all very twisted and grouped in the strangest manner, with beautiful areas of white space around them" (Letter from Brooker to L.L. FitzGerald, fall 1934, box 1, folder 11, Bertram Brooker Papers).



caused "quite a stir-up," and "brother has been incensed against brother, friend against friend. But all have been made to *think* anyway."³¹ The artist Charles Comfort recalled later that "it had a great fascination for everyone who witnessed it, though on the whole I think the Canadian public was baffled by the exhibition ... Such of my friends as Bertram Brooker, Edna Taçon,* Gordon Webber and Lawren Harris were, of course, aware and interested in the directions in which the exhibition pointed."³² So, evidently, at least a few Toronto artists besides Harris could appreciate this art. We also know that Hortense Gordon, who became one of the Painters Eleven of the fifties, saw the show.³³

* I think Comfort meant Kathleen Munn here, for Edna Taçon was just graduating from the University of Toronto at this time and had not yet begun her artistic career.



Fig. 1.5

Lawren S. Harris, *Mount Sampson, Jasper Park*, photolithograph, original size 14 × 17.8 cm, published in 1925 in *Canadian Drawings by Members of the Group of Seven: A Portfolio of Twenty Lithographs* (Toronto: Rous and Mann 1925, edition of 100). Baillie Special Collections Centre, Toronto Public Library.

Toronto's *Evening Telegram* placed a reproduction of this photolithograph, together with a sympathetic article on Harris's current work, next to an anonymous article entitled "Modern Art and the New Primitives Are Explained by Katherine Dreier" (Anon., "Lawren Harris, of the School of Seven," and Anon., "Modern Art and the New Primitives are Explained by Katherine Dreier," *Evening Telegram*, 2 April 1927).

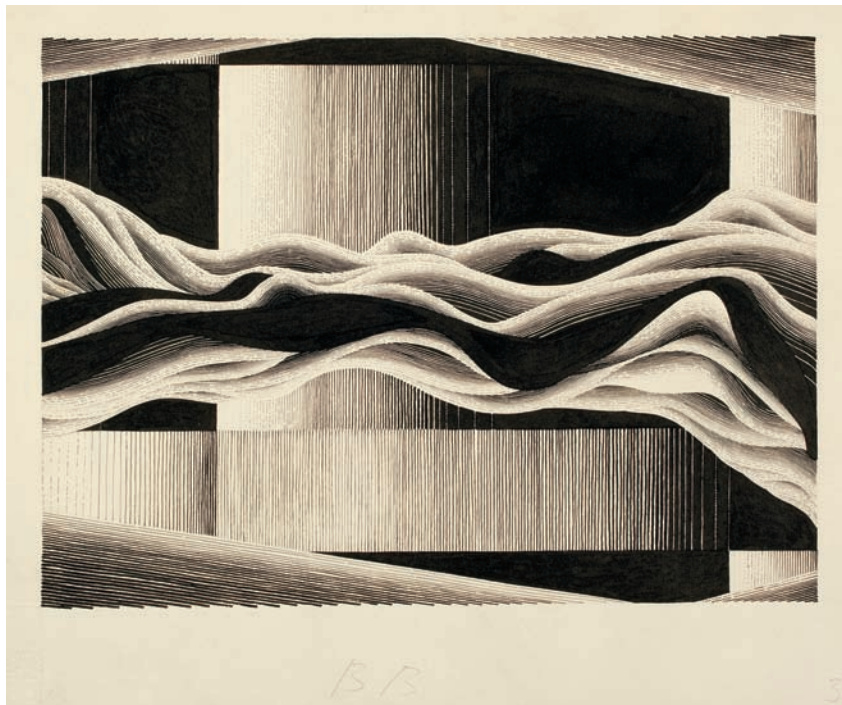


Fig. 1.6

Bertram Brooker, *Fugue*, ca. 1930. Pen and ink. Overall: 28.8 × 33.1 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario, gift of Dr Walter M. Tovell, Toronto, 1983 83/288 © Art Gallery of Ontario, 2016.

This drawing was included in the *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada 1928–1929* as an illustration of Brooker's "abstract 'musical' compositions" (Brooker, *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada*, 14). Brooker had had a show of abstract paintings at Toronto's Arts and Letters Club a few months before the Société Anonyme exhibition, so it is odd that in the preface to the *Yearbook* he disparaged artists whose work had no "human interest" or values tying it to its audience – artists of the sort that "abound in Europe," including Mondrian and Kandinsky, who were prominent in the Société Anonyme show (Peter Larisey, Notes from minute books of the Toronto Theosophical Society made during research done during October 1976, in file 3, Roy Mitchell Fonds; Carr, "Portrait of Dr. Salem Bland," 6–27). Although Brooker, like Harris, was very interested in art and the spiritual, he evidently did not share his friend's new acceptance of contemporary European art.

Although the Toronto show included only 160 works, half as many as the Brooklyn version, it represented all the original twenty or so countries except for Canada (Harris bowed out, perhaps because he considered it a gentleman's duty to do so). The large number of countries was important to Dreier's claim that the vitality of this art was global, and came not from a few individuals or from the School of Paris but from cosmic forces. L.R. Pfaff states in his history of the event that the Toronto daily press carried as many as thirteen reviews and articles about the show.³⁴ These reflect the context in which Harris's thought was developing. The more sympathetic writers accepted Dreier's argument and some embedded it in their own reviews, but the majority were unsympathetic and denied the works had spiritual content, or any content at all. The British art lecturer Stewart Dick, who was visiting North America, wrote in Toronto's *Saturday Night* that he saw Mondrian's *Clarification I* merely as "a white squarish diamond shape with four black lines on it. I heard Mr. Lawren Harris explaining on its soul-stirring properties, but to me it is neither more nor less than an excellent piece of spacing."³⁵ With that, Dick shifted his readers' attention through the door and into the gallery's central court, where there was a display of Chinese sculpture lent by the Royal Ontario Museum. Singling out a "great figure of a Buddhist deity" treated "realistically, yet with formal lines," he declared that "here is true abstraction, and yet the whole glows and smoulders with an inner spiritual life. That was a thousand years ago. Through the doorway we can glimpse the jazz patterns of 'modern Art.' Is this progress?"³⁶

Harris's Group of Seven colleagues remained curiously silent in this media debate. They certainly could have spoken out and some were very much in the habit of publishing, especially Arthur Lismer and A.Y. Jackson. The fact that they did not shows the growing difference between their concept of modern art (which would continue to have great influence in English Canada)* and Harris's.

The silence of these colleagues left Harris without any support in print from the artistic community. Harris's friend and fellow Theosophist Frederick Housser, author of the 1926 book on the Group of Seven, did publish a major essay on art in the *Canadian Theosophist* during the exhibition, but he argued that when one gets too involved in approaching art as line, form, rhythm, design, and colour, one tends "to cut oneself off from mankind and make the art experience something separate from life."³⁷ The real Art Experience was something else entirely, and he had had one at the Art Gallery of Toronto – just outside the spaces of the Société Anonyme exhibition, where he happened upon the figure of a Bodhisattva in meditation.[†] "There is not a single line in it that is unnecessary ... Here you seem to be looking at pure

* The general Group idea of modern art ended with post-impressionism, and in this they were joined by their major supporter, National Gallery director Eric Brown (Leslie Dawn, *National Visions*, 63–4 and Douglas Ord, *The National Gallery*, 75–99). Charles Hill also comments on an antipathy, official and otherwise, to modern French art, though there were more and more manifestations of it in Canada, in *Art for a Nation*, 257–60.

[†] Probably the Royal Ontario Museum's *Luohan Figure* (cast iron), Ming Dynasty, China, 1504 921.1.62, then on loan to the AGT. Thanks to Ms Gwen Adams, World Cultures Department, ROM.

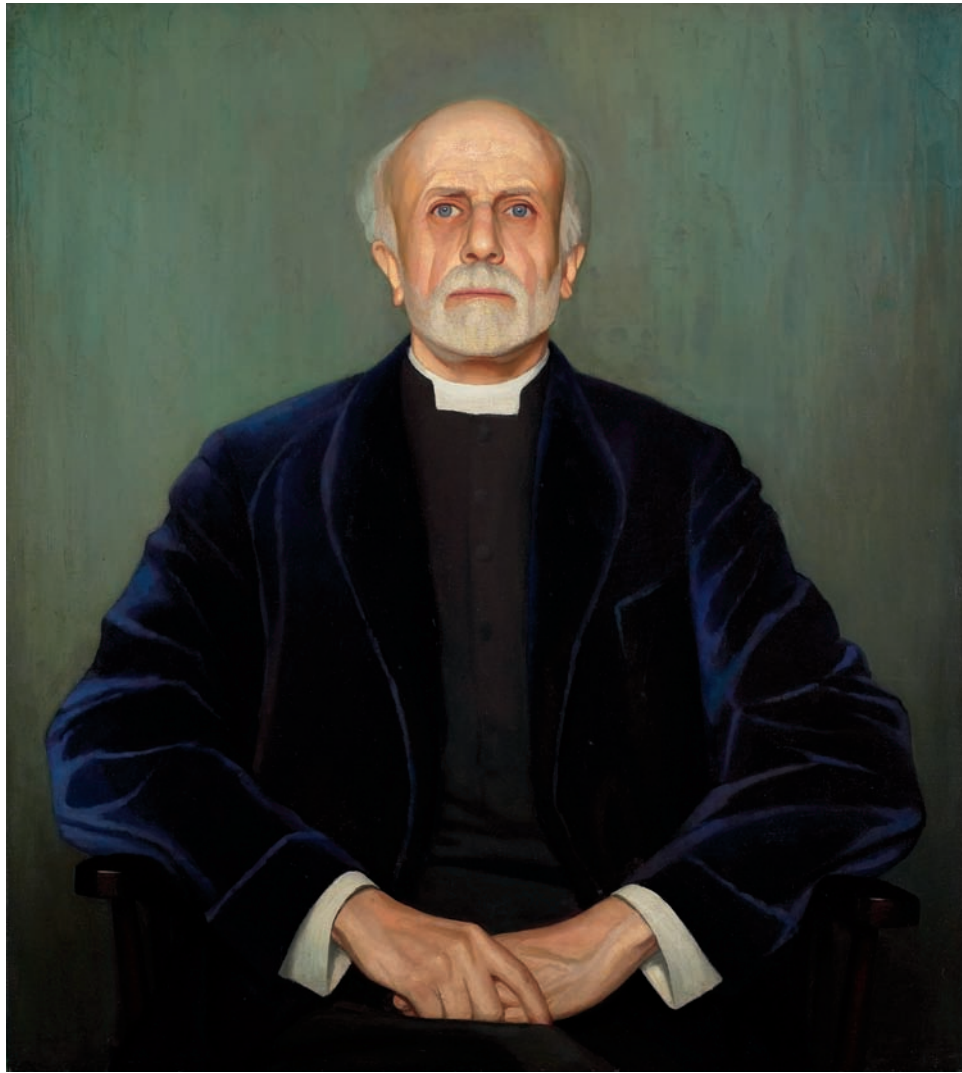


Fig. 1.7

Lawren S. Harris, *Dr. Salem Bland*, 1925. Oil on canvas. Overall: 103.5 × 91.4 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario, gift of the Toronto Daily Star, 1929 1320-A. © Family of Lawren S. Harris.

The Reverend Salem Bland was a journalist and minister of the newly formed United Church of Canada as well as a social activist, and Lawren Harris knew him well (Peter Larisey, Notes from minute books of the Toronto Theosophical Society made during research done during October 1976, in file 3, Roy Mitchell Fonds; Carr, "Portrait of Dr. Salem Bland," 6–27). Writing about the Société Anonyme show in his newspaper column, Reverend Bland spoke of the possibility of a spiritual source for a movement manifested in so many places; the artists "must have come under the power of a vision which cannot be disregarded without loss and, one may even say, without impiety" ("The Observer [Salem Bland]: A Test of Open-Mindedness," *Toronto Daily Star*, 8 April 1927). Echoing Katherine Dreier's and Lawren Harris's writings in this way, he leaves implicit the idea that art need not have a source in earlier art, i.e., Europe.

‘Being’ which does not struggle and strive but which just ‘is’ and you feel that is all that is necessary and you say to yourself ‘That’s Real.’”³⁸ Backhandedly, Housser was making a case for rejecting the European art for which Harris now advocated.

Lawren Harris, in his article “Modern Art and Aesthetic Reactions: an Appreciation” calmly defended the art in the show, especially the non-objective paintings. Addressing the various reactions to the exhibition, Harris assured readers that the works were high achievements aesthetically and spiritually, and that a viewer who really looked could be lifted to “the high resonance of spiritual reality” (echoing Clive Bell’s “a work of art carries a person who is capable of appreciating it out of life and into ecstasy”).³⁹ Harris was sensitive to one of the great achievements of modern European art, the replacement of mathematical perspective – so exciting in the Renaissance but so trivialized by the academic art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – by a space of the imagination. For instance, he remarked in his essay that “some of the abstractions yielded the experience of infinite space between flat shapes only a few inches apart,” and “though the boundary lines of the planes were as sharp and precise as a knife edge the space was soft and palpable.” To Harris, the most convincing of the non-objective works were the ones “directly created from an inner seeing” rather than by abstracting from nature, and he emphasized how much discipline and time it takes to get to that kind of seeing.

Harris’s idea of idiom is very important here. When he says that if a viewer “accepted their idiom and lived in the pictures,” he is making the same argument as when he states later in the essay that “our way is not that of Europe,” and that nobody need fear the show would drive “any real Canadian” off the path. To him the European and Canadian idioms will always be different, since idiom is the pure expression of a people, the skin over the eternal and universal core.

Once again leaving aside questions of artistic ancestors, Harris’s (and Dreier’s) rhetoric about a spiritual source for art indirectly supported the already well-published view that the Group of Seven’s painting grew from the interplay of the land and a universal internal force rather than from earlier European painting. But what had changed with the Société Anonyme exhibition was that Harris now saw a side of Europe that was new, pure, and creative. In this new art he found a spiritual essence, a universal quality that modernists found in the great art of all ages.

Harris’s shift to a way of accommodating this new Europe becomes especially apparent in 1928 in the essay “Creative Art and Canada.” He still speaks of a “spiritual flow” from the North, of a “new dispensation” in North America, and of art as the embodiment of Canada’s spiritual growth, but he also talks of a creative Europe existing beside the perverse and decadent Europe of art academies and other orthodoxies. “We, of the new race, while we are greatly indebted to creative Europe, suffer the dying grasp of a Europe fundamentally alien to us.” It is significant that he uses a greater caution now about the term “nationality,” adding that he wishes it could be replaced by something “with no combative or competitive implications.”

When Harris speaks about Canadian art in this essay, he does not call it “modern.” That term is reserved for “all so-called modern expression in every land” – which describes the Société Anonyme show. Rather, Canadian art is *creative* art, and this points to the process as well as the product. This is a painter trying to explain how it feels to paint, and then attempting the (impossible) task of broadening his ideas to embrace the art of a country.

The essay is again romantic. Charles Taylor speaks of the romantic’s need for creativity in the struggle “to recover a kind of vision of something deeper, fuller” after the loss of religious certainty,⁴⁰ and similarly, Harris sees creativity as the necessary “channel for the infiltration of the light of the spiritual realm into the darkness of earth life.” But for Harris creativity is not only for one’s own enlightenment: the artist channels the rising spiritual power of the people into art, and artist and public are two sides of a spiritual equation. That is his rather idiosyncratic theory of the connection between art and society.



As the decade wore on, Harris’s practice of Theosophy deepened. Already in December 1926 a notice in the *Toronto Theosophical News* acknowledged his long and earnest study of Theosophy as well as his international artistic reputation and the “genial and breezy personality” that had endeared him to many.⁴¹ He was a fixture at the Toronto branch of the Theosophical Society, where he gave annual lectures from 1926 to 1930⁴² and where he taught classes on Theosophy and art. This side of his life began to occupy him more than did painting, although he remained a leader among English Canadian artists and played a major part in bringing together the Canadian Group of Painters.* His writings show him becoming less the painter involved in Theosophy and more “the Theosophist who painted,” as the religious studies scholar Dawn Ambler called him.⁴³ He published articles and gave radio talks for the Theosophical Society that had nothing to do with art.⁴⁴ Bertram Brooker wrote to a friend in January 1932 that Harris had painted little for a year and that those who knew him felt he had come to the end, at least of a phase.⁴⁵ Harris himself wrote to Emily Carr in the summer of 1933 that he hadn’t “painted for ages it seems and feel as if my painting days were over.”⁴⁶ That summer, at an international Theosophical conference at Niagara Falls, Ontario, Harris did bring the two sides of his life together in his speech “Theosophy and Art.” This speech, published in the *Canadian Theosophist*, weaves his aesthetics into a larger argument about spiritual truth and the responsibility to find that truth in oneself: “The

* The Canadian Group of Painters was formed in 1933, partly in response to the last of a series of power struggles between the National Gallery and the senior conservatives of the Royal Canadian Academy over the gallery’s support of the Group of Seven. Alicia Boutilier recently described the CGP freshly as both “the first group to aspire to cross-country representation of modernist artists” and “part of the move toward greater cultural organization in Canada” in the thirties and forties (*A Vital Force*, 11).

aesthetic attitude implies a divine being within each one of us and to be disclosed over the ages by self-devised, creative effort and experience.” He contrasts aesthetics with morality, which is imposed from outside: morality is “imitative and institutionalized life, the goose-step of expediency; imitative of what goes on on earth, of what is laid down by man according to the desires of his lower nature.” He does not speak of Canada or Europe or any geography in this speech, but – the goose-step: Hitler had just become chancellor of Germany.

Harris’s thoughts on beauty and the aesthetic attitude call to mind Charles Taylor’s interpretation of Friedrich Schiller’s influential theory of the aesthetic: once old certainties and dogmas had disappeared in the modern age, the aesthetic became an “ethical category,” a “source of answers to the question, how shall we live? what is our greatest goal or fulfillment? This gives a crucial place to art. Beauty is what will save us, complete us ... Artistic creation comes to be the highest domain of human activity.”⁴⁷ Beauty in both Schiller and Goethe, Taylor says, “calls us to go beyond moralism, on one side, or a mere pursuit of enlightened interest, on the other.”⁴⁸ In fact, Harris himself brings Schiller into the beginning of “Theosophy and Art.”* Although Harris mostly speaks as an idealist in “Theosophy and Art,” he brings his points back to earthly responsibility, in an era of ominous change of which he was constantly aware.

Writing that fall of 1933 for the *Canadian Theosophist*, Harris directly addressed the rising troubles in Europe, taking a line very like that of other Toronto Theosophists who wrote for the magazine.⁴⁹ “We should remember,” he said, “that the real glories of Europe, her contributions to the unfolding spirit of man, her great achievements in the arts, where they rise above flag waving and the aggrandizement of a class or a nation; her selfless saints; her great heretics, particularly her great heretics, occultists every one of them: all were made and lived and worked despite the galloping European disease of conquest and exploitation, that has affected in one way or another all the peoples on this globe, and which disease contains within itself the virus of Europe’s death throes.”⁵⁰ Again, the two sides of Europe, the one pure, the other sickened by greed.

And now the diseased Europe was taking over. In an eight-page article published later that year and aptly titled “War and Europe,” Harris quoted at great length from a book just out by the British writer Storm Jameson,⁵¹ who was a pacifist like Romain Rolland, like Albert Smythe and some other Theosophists in Harris’s circle, and probably like Harris himself, although he remained guarded on the subject of his own politics. Harris described the theme of the book as “the vast and terrible imbecility of modern war and the state of mind of a civilization that permits

* Harris wrote in the first part of his speech that Schiller “described art as ‘that which gives to man his lost dignity’” (*Canadian Theosophist* 14, no. 5 [15 July 1933]: 129). This is a paraphrase of Schiller’s Letter IX in *Aesthetical and Philosophical Essays*, which claims that art preserves humanity’s dignity even in periods of decadence when that dignity has been lost.

it,”⁵² and he summarized Jameson’s prediction that given the opportunism of governments, the cold-blooded weapons build-up in various countries, and the absence of the political will to stop industry’s equally cold-blooded supplying of those weapons, only a miracle could prevent another European war. Harris of course translated this into Theosophical terms – “Europe, alas, seems to have stored up more evil than she can liquidate in her present incarnation” – but went on to say that this karmic state grew not only out of the subordination of human values to intellect but out of “that abstraction the nation or state, under whose strictly in-human cloak, all manner of treachery and cruelty may be not only committed and condoned but encouraged; as witness the devilish moral cowardice of Germany to-day,” where because of “a fanatical belief in the superiority of the Aryan-Germanic racial strain – a myth if there ever was one,” Jews were being bullied and killed.⁵³ “Nationalism,” he wrote in 1934, “is the curse of Europe and may prove to be the curse of the rest of the world.”⁵⁴

Of course, Harris himself was, as art historian Peter Larisey commented, a child of his time,⁵⁵ and one finds him, however infrequently, describing colonized peoples as “primitive peoples” or “the more ignorant and helpless fellows.”⁵⁶ Although he tried not to be complicit in imperial exploitation and spoke out against it, he belonged to an English Canadian elite that clearly was complicit. In basing national identity on the land, an idea shared with others but perhaps most powerfully articulated by him in his earlier writings, “much is left out,” as Andrew Hunter says, and “many voices are silent.”⁵⁷ Richard Hill, writing as an Indigenous critic, dismissed the whole project in which Harris was long involved by declaring himself simply “unwilling to believe in nationhood in the way that national narratives require.”⁵⁸ Still, it seems that by 1933 Harris might have agreed with Hill.

As Harris reveals in his letters to Emily Carr, described by Dennis Reid as “an evolving narrative of opinion, reflection, anxiety, even despair,”⁵⁹ Harris recognized how far he had to go to reach spiritual attainment and “the Universal Brotherhood of humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour,” the Theosophical ideal. He continued to work toward that ideal, and even as European and North American governments were rushing toward appeasement with Hitler, he refused such avoidance. What guided his approach to the contemporary world was precisely what guided his approach to art: his spiritual practice, in which he tried hard to take Canadians’ understanding of art, and of the spiritual of which art is an aspect, beyond the ancient bodhisattva, beyond Europe, and beyond everything in the past, and into the moment. He came finally to believe that such an understanding could grow not from love or loathing of another place, but only from a search for the universal.

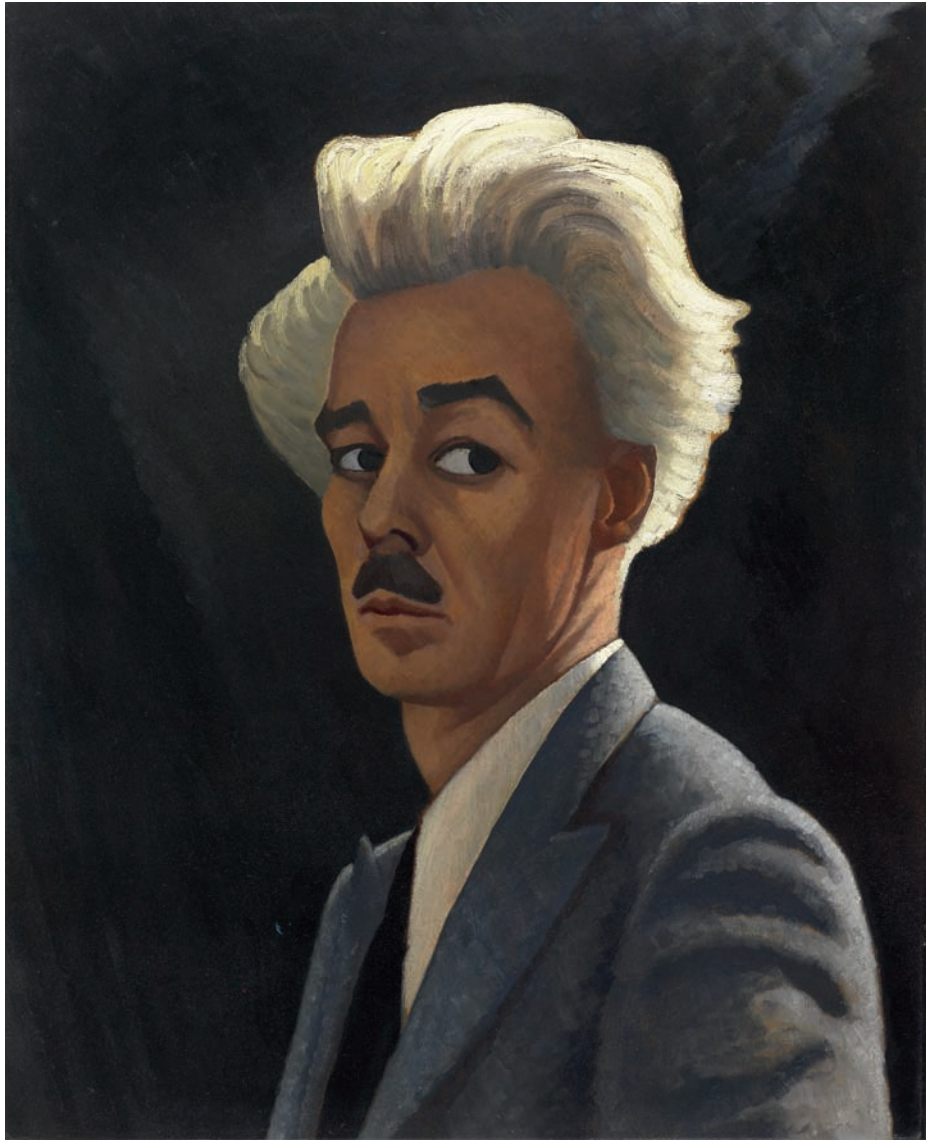


Fig. 1.8

Lawren S. Harris, *Self-Portrait*, 1932. Oil on paperboard. 80.9 × 64.5 cm. Framed: 84.3 × 67.1 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario, Anonymous Gift, 2008 2008/160. © Family of Lawren S. Harris.

L.R. Pfaff comments that this is a “satirical likeness” of Harris that “emphasizes his resemblance to Charlie Chaplin” (Pfaff, “Portraits by Lawren Harris,” 21–2). Dennis Reid, however, explaining that it was painted in February 1932 for a show of members’ self-portraits held at the Arts and Letters Club in Toronto late that month, outlines the turbulent circumstances of Harris’s personal life leading up to the moment and sees here “a man who is at the least wary of what the future holds, of how others will judge him” (Reid, “Lawren S. Harris’s Self-Portrait,” 104). Perhaps both interpretations are correct.

LAWREN STEWART HARRIS, EUROPE, AND THE BODHISATTVA
IN THE NEXT ROOM: ARTISTS' AND CRITICS' WRITINGS

Because Lawren Harris's 1926 review of Romain Rolland's book on Gandhi has not appeared in print since its original publication in the Canadian Forum, and because it says so much about Harris's attitude toward Europe at that moment, I have included all of it here, together with part of John D. Sinclair's response and Harris's subsequent letter.

The next document is a review of a 1926 Group of Seven exhibition by Wilfred Gordon Mills. It is significant in that even while calling the Group conservative in relation to "almost universal" (contemporary European) artistic currents, the writer begins to separate Harris from the nationalistic Group, and to associate his work instead with international abstraction and with Clive Bell's concept of significant form.

Four documents from the 1927 Société Anonyme exhibition appear next, and are important because the show was both a major event in the Toronto art world and a turning point in Lawren Harris's thought. The first three of these – excerpts from Canadian Forum and Canadian Bookman editorials and from an article in the Globe by Lawrence Mason – are among the rare attempts to support Harris and the Art Gallery of Toronto for bringing the exhibition to the Canadian public. The artist Doris Heustis Mills wrote to Katherine Dreier that Mason's piece "sent many people to the Gallery with prejudice at least partially removed."⁶⁰ An excerpt from Harris's own "appreciation" of the show follows them.

Harris's 1928 essay "Creative Art and Canada" builds on the idea he had developed of a pure Europe of spiritual progress existing beside a decadent one. This is a major statement of his view of Canadian artistic and spiritual progress, and it reflects a more nuanced perspective on nationalism than he had previously had.

The concluding excerpt for this chapter is from "Theosophy and Art," Harris's talk at the international Theosophical conference at Niagara Falls in 1933, published by the Canadian Theosophist as a pair of lead articles in July and August 1933. The religious studies scholar Dawn Ambler observed that the philosophically minded Harris developed a new model of the relationship between art and Theosophy,⁶¹ and this talk is the fullest expression of that model. Harris's perspective on morality – to him, an earthly affair – leads him to ring an alarm bell for what was happening on earth, and in that regard it is important to remember that in other writings from late that year – "An Epitome of Europe" in September, "War in Europe" in November – he warned urgently of preparations for war. This reflection on social and political realities makes the essay significant.

Lawren S. Harris, review of Romain Rolland's Book *Mahatma Gandhi* and his exchange with John D. Sinclair, 1925*

As one reads this book one fact stands clear from the brief recital of ideas and events. It is this. Without heroic figures striding through our kaleidoscopic bewildering days, leaving the imprint of an eternal attitude on our time, we are without hope; lacking individuals aflame with the fineness and lofty possibilities slumbering in us, we wander, lost in ignorance of our true direction and unaware of our real stature.

Gandhi seems the light of India, the soul of his people incarnate, living and labouring solely for their enlightenment. His story and his sayings should give pause to every individual in Christian lands. For in him we have indeed the true Christian, the great soul, the embodiment of Christ in our poor, proud midst, conquering by suffering, undefeatable because of a sublime gentleness, a royal faith, an all-consuming burning love of truth and men. We are told that he studied the sayings of Jesus as well as the ancient wisdom of his own race, and learnt much from the writings of many of the recent great men of the West. The Sermon on the Mount reinforced for him much of the teaching of his own scriptures, and in the wide reading of the works of nearly all the men of real vision the world has known he found corroboration of his own faith.

In his campaign to give back to India her soul, he became a political leader by necessity, plunging into all her problems, but ever endeavouring to work with, rather than against, the English Government. He was, however, naturally a spiritual leader by the magical compelling force of a great love. Always he teaches non-violence, non-vengeance, non-resistance together with a willingness to suffer all things, as the one unconquerable attitude, and he has guided his people into such ways by pacific practical means as well as by spiritual instruction.

And here we have as contrast the so sad spectacle of an alien English people ruling India for their own ends, breaking pledges, fostering enmities, resorting to violence, to wholesale incarcerations, to the massacre of utterly defenceless people, for no other discoverable reason than a vague fear of losing something. And India tells them by words, and by lives lived in its exemplification, that nothing beautiful, nothing great or worthy of man, can possibly be won by violence, that life itself only becomes glorious as it is given to non-possessive, peaceful ends. Our Western way of national aggrandizement, the present-day heritage of a perverse Europe, turning religion into an endorsement of conquest and cruelty and hate, is indeed far removed from the ideals of Gandhi. His religious teachings and

* Lawren Harris, "Gandhi," *Canadian Forum* 5, no. 55 (April 1925): 213; John D. Sinclair, "Gandhi," letter to the editor, *Canadian Forum* 5, no. 57 (June 1925): 270; Lawren Harris, "Gandhi," letter to the editor, *Canadian Forum* 5, no. 58 (July 1925): 305.

life inspire only patience, an active goodwill, and the beautiful courage of saintliness.

The contrast with western ways and thought is very marked all through the book, and should prove enlightening, even if we consider that the genius of the West requires a passage through materialism and industrialism for its unfolding.

In his disgruntled letter in the June 1925 Forum, John D. Sinclair quoted Harris's paragraph about the "so sad spectacle" of England's rule in India and continued:

I do not know how far The Canadian Forum makes itself responsible for the opinions of its contributors, or whether the opinions of Mr. Lawren Harris on the British Government in India have any special claim to public consideration; but I submit that it is disappointing that a journal of the character and credentials of The Canadian Forum should insert in its columns a judgment so damning, so indiscriminating, and so unsupported by any evidence, of the Imperial Government in its greatest and most momentous and most difficult task, to which it has devoted, and still devotes, a magnificent volume of high competence and proved good-will. I have and claim no expert authority on Indian affairs, only such warrant to an opinion as I may have gained from my residence in India during the past eleven years and from my observation of them from a liberal point of view. I believe the British Government in India is as fallible as other human governments, that in certain instances it has failed badly, and that it needs, as all governments need, a steady stream of informed and competent criticism. But I do not hesitate to say that these sentences about it which I have quoted present a mere travesty of the situation, which would be comic if it were not mischievous. Knowledge, discrimination, consideration of all the very diverse and complex interests involved, – these are not qualities that lend themselves to picturesque phrasing and a running pen; and without them the criticism of Indian Government is an impertinence. These cheap and easy generalizations are, I suggest, better fitted for two-cent newspaper head-lines than for the columns of The Canadian Forum.

'Clear out, and at once,' seems to be implied as the only honourable and humane policy for the British Government in India. It is fair to ask whether those who urge it or imply it have formed any conception of its consequences, especially for the politically dumb and helpless masses of India.

And here is Harris's response to Mr Sinclair, this time in a personal letter to the Forum's editor in the July 1925 issue.

In the June issue of The Canadian Forum, Mr. John D. Sinclair takes the Editorial Board to task for publishing a review by myself of M. Romain Rolland's book on

Gandhi. The name of the journal implies that its pages are open to the expression of various points of view, none of which the editors need necessarily endorse.

Mr. Sinclair quotes a passage from my review and makes the mistake of attributing the opinions therein expressed to me alone. That passage, as the first four words ('and here we have') show, is a summary of part of M. Rolland's book. I merely happen to share his views.

Certainly my opinion of the British Government in India has no special claim to public consideration; but those of one of the greatest writers and students of world affairs in Europe to-day may have, however violently we disagree with them.

But let us take the passage Mr. Sinclair quotes. Will he deny 'the wholesale incarcerations, the massacre of utterly defenceless people,' etc.? As for 'our western way of national aggrandizement,' if Mr. Sinclair can point out any European nation of sufficient strength to make conquest a possibility that has not striven to the utmost for national aggrandizement at the expense of its neighbors and of remote peoples, and that has not used religion to endorse its schemes of exploitation and its wars, I will then agree that my summary of M. Rolland's book was 'cheap generalization.'

We do not hold that England is at fault specifically. We know that, within the limits of a perhaps unavoidable, but fundamental wrong, she has governed India better than any other European nation might have done. But that fundamental wrong, that perversion of the whole of Europe to conquest and exploitation, with the inevitable accompanying feeling of superiority toward all subject peoples, breeds fears and mistakes and secret diplomacy and carries within itself the downfall, the death, of the nation.

W.G.M., "A Subscriber Writes of the Group Show," *Canadian Bookman*, June 1926*

"W.G.M." was undoubtedly Wilfred Gordon Mills, a poet, amateur critic, and businessman working for the T. Eaton Company in Toronto. He knew and admired Lawren Harris and was married to the painter Doris Heustis Mills, who met Katherine Dreier at the Société Anonyme show and corresponded with her, as mentioned above.

Mills is one of many writers of this period who find a convenient enemy in the Royal Canadian Academy. The RCA exhibitions weren't entirely conservative: in 1923, the annual show even had a "modernist" room which included Kathleen Munn's *The Dancers*, described as "the first Canadian attempt, so far as local exhibitions are concerned, at futuristic painting with a cubist suggestion."⁶² But in the twenties and early thirties, hard-core RCA members bitterly opposed the pro-Group of Seven stance of the National Gallery of Canada and its director Eric Brown (even

* W.G.M., "A Subscriber Writes of the Group Show," *Canadian Bookman* 8 (June 1926): 180.

though some of the Seven exhibited with the RCA, including Harris).⁶³ After a final attack on the gallery by conservative artists in 1932, the painter Pegi Nicol wrote to a friend that “art might as well die right now if ... any of them get their hands on the Gallery,”⁶⁴ and the sculptor Elizabeth Wyn Wood declared that “a generation which witnesses and accepts honest engineering in architecture and in machine is ready to appreciate the modern fine arts. Reactionaries everywhere are making a last gasp for the strongholds of official sanction.”⁶⁵

Anyone who saw the Quinn collection,* or has kept abreast of the more recent outcroppings of modernism in New York and elsewhere, cannot fail to marvel at the annual hue and cry against the Group of Seven. Compared with the average metropolitan salon the recent Group of Seven exhibition[†] is as conservative as the Royal Academy. The nude is conspicuous by its absence; likewise innuendo, distortion, decadence. In place of these we have the high clean places of the earth; virility, austerity, aspiration. All of which makes one wonder whether the usual hubbub over the Group show is not simply another expression of the modern tendency to tolerate every member of society except the Puritan. Decadence if you will says the world: austerity, never! It makes us uncomfortable.

Apart from this phase of the question it is a matter for mild amazement to hear some local reviewers still declaiming as though the absence of photographic representation in painting were the exclusive and private invention of the Group of Seven. Indeed in view of the almost universal trend of art during the past twenty-five years, one cannot help wondering whether such misunderstanding should be attributed to excessive conservatism or sheer ignorance.

Representation is no more indispensable in painting than in music. All truly great art has tended to depart from it. In music the argument has been admitted, and the concert-goer is no longer educated to expect the sounds of the barnyard in the Pastoral Symphony. Even “The Storm”[‡] is gradually disappearing from the organ recital, and our orchestra programme notes are confining themselves more and more to matters of design and thematic construction. Yet in spite of this, literal representation is still generally demanded of pictorial art.

Surely the high function of both music and painting is to convey an emotion rather than an outward appearance: to transmit a feeling rather than a photograph. A representative painting of a mountain is simply a copy of what is reflected on the eye’s retina. A true painting of a mountain is a more or less imperfect record of what transpires in the soul of the person behind the retina.

* The American collector John Quinn owned the most important collection in North America of post-impressionist, cubist, and other recent European art. A memorial exhibition of a part of that collection was held at the New York Art Center in 1926.

† The show had hung at the Art Gallery of Toronto in May, and F.B. Housser’s review of it preceded W.G.M.’s piece (pp. 179–80).

‡ Very likely Jacques-Nicolas Lemmens’s “Grand Fantasia (The Storm) in E minor,” from *Four Organ Pieces in Free Style* of 1866. Thanks to Prof. John Mayo, University of Toronto.

The first can be experienced by any Pullman passenger who cares to look up from his magazine. The second is reserved exclusively for him that has purified himself to understand. "Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful," says Emerson, "we must carry it with us or we find it not."* Here, as elsewhere, "it is the spectator and not the picture that is on trial."

For this reason it is a little distressing to stand in front of a typical Harris canvas and listen to the perplexity of those who expect photography. To refer to Lawren Harris as a symbolist, however, is simply to beg the question. No one but Mr. Harris knows what Mr. Harris means, but it is safe to assert that he is never a preacher. Such painting may be mysticism but it is never propaganda. Mr. Harris simply paints what he feels, and his symbolism is fortuitous rather than intentional. Perhaps it might be said of him as it has been said of Swedenborg and others, that "they used the earth symbolically, and when they saw terrestrial objects, did not think at all about them, but only about those which they signified."†

Consequently, if one elects to feel in Lawren Harris's much-maligned "Mountain Forms" some profound analogy to those momentary glimpses of that many-colored land which, in all ages, out of the stillness of meditation, has lifted its celestial peaks against the sombre background of the earth-life, it is not because Mr. Harris has set out to preach us this particular sermon, but simply because, to those who see that way, every natural object has its inevitable spiritual correspondence. One may get a Bach Fugue out of this same picture with equal satisfaction. Conversely one may get a similar vision out of a Bach Fugue. Such spiritual correspondences are universally true of all art which is based upon the profound significance of Form, and art becomes prophecy and vision to the exact extent to which that Form is searched out and comprehended.

From an anonymous editorial comment on the Société Anonyme exhibition, *Canadian Forum*, 1927‡

In this finely written and insightful statement, the anonymous author accepts Clive Bell's principle that art can express something significant without a recognizable subject, but differs from Harris in finding that something in the human consciousness rather than the spiritual. Without speaking specifically of any of the works or the countries from which they come, the writer shows sympathy with up-to-the-minute European art.

* From Emerson's "Essay XII: Art," 1841.

† Emerson, "Swedenborg; or, the Mystic" (1850).

‡ From an anonymous editorial, *Canadian Forum* 7, no. 80 (May 1927): 228.

This editorial appeared in the same issue of the Canadian Forum as Harris's essay on the show.

Whatever may be the individual value of those very modern paintings recently shown at the Art Gallery, the exhibition as a whole is certain to have done some good. It is certain to have helped a few people – six or twelve or a hundred – to a better realization of the fact that the visual arts are not ultimately the handmaids of literature but something fundamentally different, an affair of space-relations, expressed through colour, line, solid form. Very few laymen and not all artists realize this with their own natures, though many of the uninitiated have accepted the fact theoretically and are not at variance with it. The colour-organist, the cubist, and their clan, all tell us in unequivocal terms that the world of space-relations, intellectually explored for centuries by the mathematician, can also be sensuously explored by the artist, that the pure art of space is just as legitimate philosophically as the pure art of time, which is opened for us by the sound-vibrations of music. This is the great incontrovertible fact behind the freaks and the oddities, the frequent spuriousness, and the occasional high solemnity of the works in question. Nothing can shake it; the more we study the human consciousness, the more we see how firm and deep-rooted in our nature is the basis of this difficult and perplexing art.

Anonymous, from “Classifying Canadian Art,” *Canadian Bookman*, 1927*

As with the preceding editorial, one wishes to know who wrote this, since support in print for the Société Anonyme show was so rare. The comment about “our art” likely refers to the Group of Seven.

The idea, loudly expressed in Canada, that much of our art is crude and freakish, is not being endorsed abroad. The recent exhibition of modern European work shown in Toronto made many people realize that the most extreme work produced in Canada is almost academic.

The exhibition in Paris of all phases of Canadian art has not shocked France in the least.[†] One critic complains of its timidity. Others find a native quality only in the most advanced efforts [...]

We pride ourselves on our mental alertness, and in all progress in science, but in art it is supposed to be a virtue to drag along cautiously, putting our little feet gingerly in the footprints giants made a hundred years ago.

* Anon., from “Classifying Canadian Art,” *Canadian Bookman* 9, no. 5 (May 1927): 137.

[†] A show of Canadian paintings organized by the National Gallery hung at the Jeu de Paume in April and May. It failed to excite French reviewers, as the writer suggests above and as John O'Brian notes in *Beyond Wilderness* (193). National Gallery director Eric Brown attempted to smooth over this lack of success in his article “Canadian Art in Paris,” *Canadian Forum* 8, no. 4 (September 1927): 360–1.

Lawrence Mason, from “‘Modern Art’ Displayed in International Exhibit at Toronto Art Gallery,” *The Globe*, 1927*

While Mason had none of Lawren Harris’s ambivalence toward Europe, his position in this review resembles Harris’s and Clive Bell’s when he refers to abstract art as a variant of the absolute, and he adopts Katherine Drier’s argument that this art was so widespread that it must have come from cosmic forces.

*Mason specialized in theatre criticism but was also highly respected for his writing on music,⁶⁶ and in this review he proves himself to be an able art critic too (the art historian Ruth Bohan, discussing this article and Harris’s “Modern Art and Aesthetic Reactions” in her book on the Société Anonyme exhibition, notes that the greatest number of “positive and insightful comments” about the show came from Toronto and Buffalo, not New York City).⁶⁷ Mason had a PhD from Yale, where he had taught literature and philosophy and published on Shakespeare and other subjects,⁶⁸ and he worked at the *Globe* newspaper from his arrival in Toronto in 1924 until his death in 1939. The playwright Lois Reynolds Kerr commented that Mason was “among the important people on the *Globe* who had their own little cubicles to which he would return late at night to write his reviews. He was as I recall rather a solitary person, I believe a bachelor, and I don’t think he mixed with the rest of the editorial staff ... He was a law unto himself, ran his own show from his dark little cubicle.”⁶⁹*

At last “modern art” in the field of drawing, painting and sculpture has come to Toronto in sufficient force to convince any reasonable person that it is a mistake to remain in ignorance of the methods and purposes of this world-wide movement. The following article has been prepared in the hope of helping such reasonable persons to understand sympathetically, even if they then may not care to accept practically, the fundamental assumptions, principles and motives which have produced the manifestations known variously as Post-Impressionism, Expressionism, Futurism, Cubism, Orphism, Synchronism, Vorticism, Constructivism, Da-Daism, and the like.

In the International Exhibition of Modern Art now on view at the Art Gallery of Toronto, the Société Anonyme has assembled nearly two hundred examples of the new tendencies in the plastic and pictorial arts by artists of more than twenty different nations. For people who have not travelled extensively, this exhibition performs the great service of bringing Europe to our very doors.

Of course, those who are really in touch with the subject will know that there are considerably more extreme phases than any shown here, but the collection is

* L[awrence] M[ason], from “‘Modern Art’ Displayed in International Exhibit at Toronto Art Gallery / Nearly Two Hundred Examples by Artists of Over Twenty Different Nations on View – Interesting Foreword in Catalogue a Great Aid to the Uninitiated / Globe Reviewer Explains Cult,” *Globe* (Toronto), 6 April 1927.

a representative one nevertheless, and comprises all that any one needs for a thorough understanding of post-impressionist movements in art. Many of the exhibits now at the Gallery were seen and briefly commented upon by the “Globe-trotter” last summer in Europe.*

Advice for the Uninitiated.

To begin with, every one should read and digest the Foreword and Introduction in the Catalogue. Next we may do well to realize that we have, all of us, always accepted “in principle” the chief fundamental assumption of modern art. For instance, in the annual shows of the Toronto Camera Club[†] we realize that photography moves away from a lifeless mechanical process and tends to become a living art in proportion as it forsakes bald literalism or factual realism and introduces other elements, such as imagination, personality, and design.

We know, also, that if you turn a mirror on nature the result is not necessarily a picture, in the artistic sense, because certain vital elements – such as selection, composition, and intelligent purpose – are lacking. Just so with the Graphic Art Show and the historical paintings and drawings by C.W. Jefferys,[‡] on view in the adjoining rooms: some of these exhibits fail to reach the level of real art because mere illustration, a transcript of supposed facts, lacks just this prime requisite of all great art, the expression of the human spirit.

The Logical Inference.

Well, then, when we have once admitted that art begins with the departure from superficial actualities, why not admit further that the more we dispense with these lifeless facts or hampering outward appearances and allow free play for the higher human faculties, the purer will be the art-form resulting?

Such at least is the entirely logical position of modern art, briefly stated. A painted portrait may be a truer likeness than a photograph, as well as a far greater work of art, because the painter forsakes outer fact for inner truth, mechanical reproduction for personal analysis, the literal for the spiritual, the objective for the subjective [...]

Strength of the modern position.

It is difficult to see how modern art can be successfully attacked, in theory. And in practice, if one maintains that the proof of the pudding is in the eating, one is met by the axiom that there is no absolute rule in questions of taste. We may not

* In the summer and fall of 1926 Mason travelled in Europe and sent back reviews of drama, music, film, and art events.

[†] The club's thirty-sixth annual spring salon ran concurrently with the Société Anonyme show at the Art Gallery of Toronto.

[‡] The fourth annual Canadian Society of Graphic Art show, together with *Historical Paintings by C.W. Jefferys*, R.C.A., O.S.A., also ran concurrently with the Société Anonyme show.

like “abstract” art, but others may. In any event, there is so much of it going on all over the world that we cannot intelligently ignore it.

As for the question of beauty, this too is merely a matter of taste. What is beautiful to one is ugly to another. There is a fine modern sonnet beginning “Euclid alone has seen true Beauty bare,”* which suggests very well the beauty of the abstract, and no one will deny that there may be a beauty in machinery, a beauty in pattern and design, in “significant form,” in idea, construction, relation, power, in old age, deformity, disease, or even death itself.

However, it is important to remember that one of the most fruitful sources of the whole modern movement was the revolt against beauty, against the idea that everything in art had to be sweet and pretty and fragrant and all dressed up in its Sunday best. The older art stood for the “beautified,” the imitated, and the academically conventional in drawing, coloring, arrangement, perspective, etc. The freer, newer art stands for simplification, organization, and expression.

Lawren S. Harris, from “Modern Art and Aesthetic Reactions: An Appreciation,” 1927[†]

Given Harris’s involvement with the Canadian Forum as a writer and member of the editorial board, and given the Forum’s status as a national magazine with a more general readership than the Canadian Theosophist, the Forum was the natural place to publish his main statement on the Société Anonyme exhibition. It appeared next to the only truly impolite review of the show, written by former Group of Seven member Franz Johnson, which called the Braque still life “sickening even to one with a good strong stomach” and the Mondrian less significant and organized than a piece of clear glass.⁷⁰ The two were published together in order to “present both sides of the case,” the editorial note introducing the pair explained.

Most of the pictures were abstract. These could be divided as coming from two sources. One half of them from naturalistic sources wherein the more abstract and lasting qualities of design, movement, rhythm, equilibrium, spatial relationship, light, and order were extricated from the fleeting aspects of a scene or scenes to suggest its informing, persisting life. The other half, and in the main the most convincing pictures, were directly created from an inner seeing and conveyed a sense of order in a purged, pervading vitality that was positively spiritual. Many of these abstractions appeared flat at the first seeing, but with contemplation or sometimes in an unguarded moment, they unfolded in space and became absolute within their frames; that is, by no power of sight or thinking could any

* Edna St Vincent Millay, “Euclid Alone Has Looked on Beauty Bare,” 1920.

[†] Lawren Harris, from “Modern Art and Aesthetic Reactions: An Appreciation,” *Canadian Forum* 7, no. 80 (May 1927): 239–41.

plane, colour, or surface be shifted from its exact place in space, and though the boundary lines of the planes were as sharp and precise as a knife edge the space was soft and palpable. Some of the abstractions yielded the experience of infinite space between flat shapes only a few inches apart. Again, they could be viewed as an indication in aesthetic terms of the trend of scientific thought.

There were other pictures that, by a peculiar relationship of concrete objects and by rendering transparent some of their planes, sought to give the experience of the unreality of appearances. Others portrayed the unreality of dreams. Still other works by distortion and unnaturalistic use of colour achieved bold and immense relations that almost became devices expressive of the outlook and life of a whole people.

The exhibition proved rather a treat to most people. Many were angered, many resorted to ridicule; but some remained to contemplate truly; and, while no one could quite accept all the pictures, nevertheless they had many new and illuminating experiences.

Perhaps if we deal with some reactions and misconceptions which the pictures induced, we may convey a clearer idea of their scope and trend.

The works that were direct creations of abstract arrangements appeared to most people like charts, as if they were arrived at by mathematical calculation or by the use of the engineering draughtsman's instruments. In reality they were achieved by a precision and concentration of feeling so fine that on the emotional gamut they parallel the calculations of higher mathematics. But, they remain emotional, living works, and were therefore capable of inspiring lofty experiences; one almost saw spiritual ideas, crystal clear, powerful, and poised.

Again, if these pictures were compared to other and accepted works they appeared eccentric. But if one accepted their idiom and lived in the pictures – as one must to know and experience any art – one found scarcely an eccentricity in the whole exhibition. Within their idiom they were logical, ordered – some few almost magical in their arrangement.

The idea which many onlookers acquired that painting should confine itself to native moods or to various interpretations and not be metaphysical, mystic, or psychological, or express pure abstract ideas is certainly an arbitrary one. Surely one may express any conceivable idea, trend, thought, or experience so long as the form of its expression and the idea are appropriate the one to the other.

Also the notion that any child can create such pure abstractions, that they are haphazard fantasies, is quite erroneous. Children create a different kind of expression. Only long time, much brooding and hard work, through almost endless study and penetration into the ephemerality of nature will lead to a classification that has the high resonance of spiritual reality. Exacting indeed is the way, demanding an austerity few laymen and none of the looser variety of artists are aware of.

Many people deeply interested in the future of Canadian Art feared that the direction shown in the exhibition might lure some Canadian artists from their path. That seems very unlikely. While the exhibition did stimulate creative thought and emotion and opened new and thrilling vistas, it would be almost impossible now for any real Canadian artist to imitate any European artist. Our way is not that of Europe, and, when we evolve abstractions, the approach, direction, and spirit will be somewhat different. Furthermore, the exhibition has enlarged the vision of many of our people, has awakened them to a greater range of ideas and new possibilities of expression and has thus enlarged the eliciting audience for our artists. This should keep them true to their own path and help clarify their particular direction.

Lawren S. Harris, from “Creative Art and Canada,” *Supplement to the McGill News*, 1928*

The McGill News is the newspaper of McGill University, and its Supplement, published from 1926 to 1930, contained a wide range of articles of interest to an educated public.

This article is written from the creative point of view. As the creative attitude in Canada needs much explanation and as any explanation is of more importance than an account of art and artists, we shall have to go into this explaining at some length.

While imitative life or second hand living in European hand-me-downs is all too common amongst us, creative life is a comparatively rare manifestation and its immediate results are irritating and foreign to some people. It is only through its objectified results in works of art or expressed ideas that people become aware that new life is stirring. So that it is about works of art and ideas that people become perturbed and not about creative life directly, as that is quite intangible and almost nothing is actually known about it.

We may say, however, that creative life begins to stir in a people faintly and hazily and almost unconsciously, and that it only approaches precise expression through a few individuals who respond to it vibrantly and who are also capable of concentrating the diffuse spiritual force into new works. We may further say that the creative individual and his people are as necessary to each other for their respective illumination as the negative and positive forces of electricity.

Creative life commences to stir because of the stimulus of the total environment, physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. This evokes the creative faculty into activity in the exact degree of the individual's capacity of awareness and

* Lawren Harris, from “Creative Art and Canada,” *Supplement to the McGill News* 10, no. 1 (December 1928): 6–11; reprinted in the *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada* 1928–1929, 177–86.

vision. The creative faculty being spiritual, or rather, being the active channel for the infiltration of the light of the spiritual realm into the darkness of earth life, is universal and without Time. We have thus the seeming paradox that it needs the stimulus of earth resonance and of a particular place, people and time to evoke into activity a faculty that is universal and timeless.

Here we may find the solution to the seemingly opposing statements that “there is no such thing as a national art” and on the other hand that all manifestations in art are of time, place and people. Both are true, for a paradox is not a contradiction, but the statement of the same fact from different points of view or in two different realms of being. We can say then that the idiom, the emphasis, the garment of art in each age and with each people is the result of the awakened sense of the relationship of mankind, time and place, and that this is what we call national or immediate. And we may also say that the universal urge toward unity through infinite diversity and toward the consummation of understanding and love through infinite experience is of the spirit and that this is not immediate only, but eternal. The creative faculty is the means of communion between these two, the immediate and the eternal. Genius manifests the momentary fusion of pure earth resonance and the light of the spirit and for such there is no paradox or difference.

Thus it can be said that a people must become individualized before the universal can have any meaning for it. It must give life to its own *particular* attitude which depends upon the interplay of its time, its place on earth and its capacity, before it can become aware of the universal spirit that informs all great manifestations and all noble living. It must create before it can hope to comprehend the creative results of other peoples and other times. For creative life is a process founded on faith in its own illuminating powers which enables it to understand the creations of other peoples and other times.

There are two reasons for the changing manifestations of creative life. The first I have just tried to suggest. It is the forever new result of the interplay of a people’s capacity and its environment. It is what we call “Nationality,” though we need another word with no combative or competitive implications. The second reason is that the world moves into new relationships in space and into new impingements that elicit a somewhat new way of seeing in its humanity.

To-day creative life enters a new realm. There is thus a markedly new attitude emerging through all forms of creative activity. All so-called modern expression in every land is being affected by it. It amounts to a new dispensation and a new conception of beauty and fitness and meaning, and this is much more closely related to the great works of antiquity than to the Europe of Royal Academies. We see signs of this today in painting and sculpture, music, literature, architecture (not in Canada) and decoration on the stage and in the home. Thus the newer unreminiscent-of-Europe, magnificent structures in New York, give us a strange feeling of some remote grandeur that is yet very close to our hearts.

The new attitude is nowhere moralistic, nor dogmatically religious. To it art is not a matter of copying Nature, or sentimentality. Nor does it regard the artist as either a hero or a ninny. It has its own dangers and its own possibilities of hocus-pocus, but these are not the same as in past centuries. Its possibilities of directness, of candour, of clear seeing, even of spiritual realism, are far greater than those of recent centuries. It is all very trying for those who cling to the older way of seeing, and they may think the world is upon mad days, but it is, for creative spirits, a source of inspiration and joy.

The less attached to old modes, worn-out attitudes, fabrics of past and dying cultures, that is, the purer and clearer the modern attitude, the more readily we will understand the great works and periods of the past. We will see that creative activity and vital understanding are the same throughout the ages, and the spirit ever an unique, first-hand experience that cannot be copied. Thus to-day Beethoven, Brahms, Bach, Shakespeare, Goethe, Dante, Giotto, El Greco and Leonardo are luminous to creative individuals, and likewise all that is spurious, all that resulted from the goose-step of the academies and dead and dying orthodoxies is disregarded. For every creative individual to the exact extent of his capacity for rejuvenation, gives life to what he finds worthy and leaves that which has the germ of decay in it to die. This winnowing process goes on here and now amongst us, and is creative of our future values.

There is still another factor that for us is of great importance. Just as we enter into new relationships in space which evoke a new attitude and are giving rise to what we call the modern world, so there is a new race forming on this continent, the race of the new dispensation which will develop and embody the new attitude. It grows now largely within the swaddling clothes of European culture and tradition, but its ideals are not the same. Its attitude is not the same. Its direction is not the same, as both Lincoln and Whitman knew.

In its formation and growth we Canadians play, and will play, an increasingly vital part. We live on the fringe of the great North across the whole continent and its spiritual flow, its clarity, its replenishing power passes through us to the teeming people south of us. It may be that the very glory of our life is in giving expression to this that comes to us pure in ideas, thoughts, character and attitude, through deeds and the arts for the larger part of the forming race to the south as well as to ourselves. And it may be that our greatest danger is to seize on anything for our own express benefit. Indeed the continuous movement of Canadians to the States – teachers, doctors, nurses, writers and the like – may have a far greater significance than that of mere economic determinism. They may be one of the means of the infiltration of a certain clarity and unpretentious devotion, certain intangible elements in the quiet side of the Canadian character that is born of the spirit of the North and reflects it.



The emphasis of the north in the Canadian character that is born of the spirit of the north and reflects it, has profoundly affected its art, and its art in turn, clarifies and enhances the quality of Canadian consciousness.

So, in the modern world, and in the new world on this continent, we slowly emerge from the swaddling clothes of the old Europe. Without these we could not have been born and would not have grown; but now the new race is finding its own character and direction, its own creative zest, and it seeks to possess and express its own soul. But so many people in North America cling to the European attitude and its traditions because it has attained to its expression in an intricate culture and because the comfort of its immense background of tradition is almost the only security they know. They view the strivings and directions of the new, now adolescent race – their race – with disdain or misgivings.

There is on this continent then, a combat of ideals and ideas, attitudes and directions, and while the works of European creative goodwill inspire us and illumine for us our own powers and direction, the old Europe of the old dispensation of conquest and exploitation and national hatreds is sick and seeks new life here among us. In other words we, of the new race, while we are greatly indebted to creative Europe, suffer the dying grasp of a Europe fundamentally alien to us, and we are somewhat confused. This confusion now forces us to clarify our direction and to give emphasis and precision to our own vision.

Fig. 1.9
Aboard the Beothic, A.Y.
Jackson, Captain Falk,
and Lawren Harris, 1930.
Harris is on the left.
Photographer unknown.
e011061808, Library
and Archives Canada.

Lawren S. Harris, from “Theosophy and Art,” *Canadian Theosophist*, 1933*

There is a moving side to this essay that comes out when Harris speaks, however indirectly, of his own experience as an artist. Andrew Hunter, an artist himself as well as a curator, sees that personal aspect too, and suggests that all of Harris’s writing is actually about his own work, that Theosophy really functioned for him as a valuable parallel like music and Kandinsky’s writing.⁷¹ Certainly, artists choose theorists and schools of thought because they match their own predilections, but in this article Harris does speak of “we Theosophists.” I agree rather with Ambler: at this point Harris was so deeply into Theosophy that he filtered all this ideas through it.

We have for the conduct of man on earth four main divisions or categories of ideas.

We have, firstly, laws, fashioned by man to meet the exigencies of time and place and people, and administered by courts and judges and police.

These are the stop and go signs of physical existence.

Secondly, we have a moral code.

This varies in different ages and in different places and with different people.

It is dictated by general self interest or expediency; is personal and possessive, dogmatic and inelastic, and is most frequently derived from some so-called authoritative religion.

It is extrinsic and aims at achieving some degree of outward harmony by outward means.

It is of the desire nature, of and for the lower man.

Thirdly, we have ethics, which is of the mind, is logical and results in a scheme or theory.

And fourthly, we have aesthetics, which is of the intuition or spiritual intelligence.

It is of the life of the soul as distinct from that of the person.

It is an attitude, not a code or creed, nor a scheme or theory.

It is an attitude which discloses the memory of the divine in us.

It is intrinsic and the source of all harmony in life and is essentially creative.

Indeed, it is the source of all the creative arts.

It is indefinable and can only be known when it is lived in terms of direct experience, in some degree [...]

* Lawren Harris, from “Theosophy and Art,” *Canadian Theosophist* 14, no. 5 (15 July 1933): 129–32, and 14, no. 6 (15 August 1933): 161–6. These excerpts are from the first four pages of the August issue.

There is little known about aesthetics, because it is something that cannot be analyzed. To try to dissect it is to lose its spirit which is to say, to lose its meaning, its significance; just as an anatomist cannot find the consciousness by dissecting the body.

It is only as a living, functioning attitude, that it has any meaning.

So that to approach the problem of the aesthetic attitude must be the same as the approach to the problem of art and the approach to the problem of the creative life.

For these are in essence one and the same, and imply a living attitude and not a formula.

Furthermore, they can only be understood by awareness at the summit of the soul, at the very forefront of our being.

The reason for this is, that at the summit of the soul, at intensity of awareness, we are every one of us essentially simple; we are pure perception without encumbrances, not a person but a perceiving power.

We are then above man made laws, above all codes, all creeds, all dogmas, all scholarship, all earthly comfort and props.

Our back is turned not only to the accumulated debris of the ages but to all the confusing formulations and acceptances of our own day and place.

We then glimpse the real meaning of beauty

And this is the experience of the aesthetic attitude

And once having had that experience, even faintly

Nothing afterwards seems right in human life that is not beautiful [...]

Morality in itself has no meaning.

In itself it is no more than a device.

Morality is actually the dead letter of aesthetics precisely as a creed is the dead letter of the spirit of a religion.

Thus the moral attitude and the aesthetic attitude represent two quite different and usually antithetical attitudes toward life.

Morals presuppose an extra-cosmic god, a law giver outside of or beyond this universe.

The aesthetic attitude implies a divine being within each one of us and to be disclosed over the ages by self-devised, creative effort and experience.

The moral attitude is sterile, uncreative, un-adventurous, is led and does not lead.

Whereas the aesthetic attitude is creative and fertile and implies adventure at the very forefront of one's being.

Morality is imitative and institutionalized life, the goose-step of expediency; imitative of what goes on on earth, of what is laid down by man according to the desires of his lower nature [...]

We may know any moral code by studying it; we may know ethics by reading and thinking about it, but we do not have to live either of them to know them.

But the laws of the realm of spirit, whose reflection is our ideals and whose functioning is aesthetics, have to be lived in some degree, before they can be known. If they are not disclosed within us by becoming in some degree an indissoluble part of our life, they are then lost to us.

And this, I think, occurs because they cannot be formulated. They are incapable of being confined in a code or creed, because they are beyond the intellect. They have to be experienced before they can be known.

And perhaps this is why the living, enduring content, the spirit of all great art and all true religion remains untranslatable into words.

It cannot be explained, we must become one with it before we can know it.

Discovering David Milne

The thing I have missed the most since leaving New York long ago has been the contact with other people, the play of opposition and agreement. The arguments down on 42nd Street, the meetings and exhibitions etc.

David Milne to James Clarke, March 1930

A year before he wrote this to his old friend James Clarke, David Milne had returned from the States to Canada for good, and he and his wife were about to move to the village of Palgrave, in hilly farming country only a dollar's train fare away from Toronto, where he hoped to make a name for himself. As things turned out, he seldom left Palgrave and seldom exhibited because he lacked the cash for frames, shipping, and city clothes, though his painting and his work in drypoint etching went very well. But that life ended after three years when rental accommodation dried up, a bank failure disrupted his income from an upstate New York house he had built with James Clarke, and Milne and his wife separated.

He left the village in spring 1933 and headed north alone. After camping on a rocky point at the shore of Six Mile Lake near the lower edge of Georgian Bay for much of the summer, he built a twelve-by-sixteen-foot tarpaper cabin, where he lived for six years. It was eleven kilometres of walking, skiing, or canoeing to the Severn Falls train station, and from there 160 kilometres straight south to Toronto by rail.

Even further out of contact with any art world than he had been in Palgrave, he might have abandoned his career as did many artists in the depths of the Depression. But he kept on, and what was written by and about Milne during the years at Six Mile Lake tells a story not only of his incredible persistence but of the growth of a context for what Bertram Brooker called the "third movement in Canadian painting," a movement that would "bear a closer relationship to the modern movement in other countries."¹

What set it all off for Milne was his taking, from that isolation, the astonishing and now-famous step of offering his lifetime of pictures, about a thousand, to Alice and Vincent Massey, for \$5,000. "It is really a museum proposition," he commented to Clarke,² but he knew that in the depths of the Depression no Canadian museum could consider such an offer, not even at that price. The Masseys had developed a reputation as patrons of Canadian art, music, theatre, and education after the First World War. Vincent Massey had been named a trustee of the National Gallery, and then head of the first Canadian legation to Washington by the Liberal

Fig. 2.1

Douglas Duncan Photographs: *Milne at Six Mile Lake* (exterior image of Milne painting), 1 September 1936. Gelatin silver print. Print: 10.5 × 8 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario, gift of the Milne Family Collection, 2009, LA.MF.779.



prime minister Mackenzie King,³ but after King's fall from power in 1930, the Masseys took up residence at their country estate at Port Hope, Ontario, and continued to build what was by the mid-thirties the largest private collection of contemporary Canadian art in the country.⁴ It included a Milne they had bought at the National Gallery's Annual Exhibition of Canadian art in 1932, the only oil painting Milne had sold since returning to Ontario, and Milne and Alice Massey had exchanged gracious notes on that occasion. A year later she took the initiative of writing to praise him for a "beautifully composed" letter he had sent to the *Ottawa Citizen* supporting the National Gallery during the controversy raised against it by academic painters.⁵

In August 1934 Milne sent these potential patrons twenty-nine pages of single-spaced typing and lovely drawings, a letter aptly described by art historian John O'Brian as "one of the most fully conceived pleas for patronage in the history of modern art."⁶ The aim, Milne wrote, "is to trade twenty-five years of painting that is past for five or ten years in the future." He appealed to them as enlightened connoisseurs, complimenting their intelligence by exercising his own as he explained the working ideas he had been accumulating since his New York days.

Among those ideas, aesthetic emotion is particularly important. The art historian François-Marc Gagnon observed that the idea, borrowed from Clive Bell, had been “completely integrated into his own system of thought.”⁷ Aesthetic emotion, or aesthetic quickening, as Milne sometimes called it, was to him two things: first, the mysterious “driving force” an artist encounters at the moment when “you see things you wouldn’t ordinarily see, you solve problems that have been simmering for months”;⁸ and second, the translating of that force into colour and line, where a viewer can experience it. Aesthetic emotion is an energy best transmitted, Milne felt, when the viewer grasps the picture quickly, and his several “motives,” described finely by Megan Bice as “perceptual motifs to convey experience,”⁹ were compositional devices intended to speed up a picture. In the Massey’s letter he described a few, including the serenity motive – a sky as a blank “area of rest” above the detailed shapes on the ground – and the interrupted vision motive, where the artist embraces an uninteresting object that is partly in the way of seeing something and uses it to “engage the attention quickly, and immediately release it in the detailed part of the picture.” These and other motives “interlock, and merge, and continue indefinitely,” and were never planned; they simply emerged from the work. Milne had used similar language in his occasional letters to Harry McCurry at the National Gallery¹⁰ and often in his letters to James Clarke.

Milne must have invested a great deal of time and energy in the Massey letter without any sense at all of what the answer would be. After all, he was proposing something completely unheard of, and besides, the Masseys were involved in so many arts, and so many things besides art. But they asked to see the pictures Milne had in the cabin, and after bringing Harry McCurry in for a consultation, they accepted these two hundred and fifty pictures together with another small consignment from Buffalo at Milne’s price – five dollars each. The rest of the pictures, the ones stored in the States, were left out of the deal.

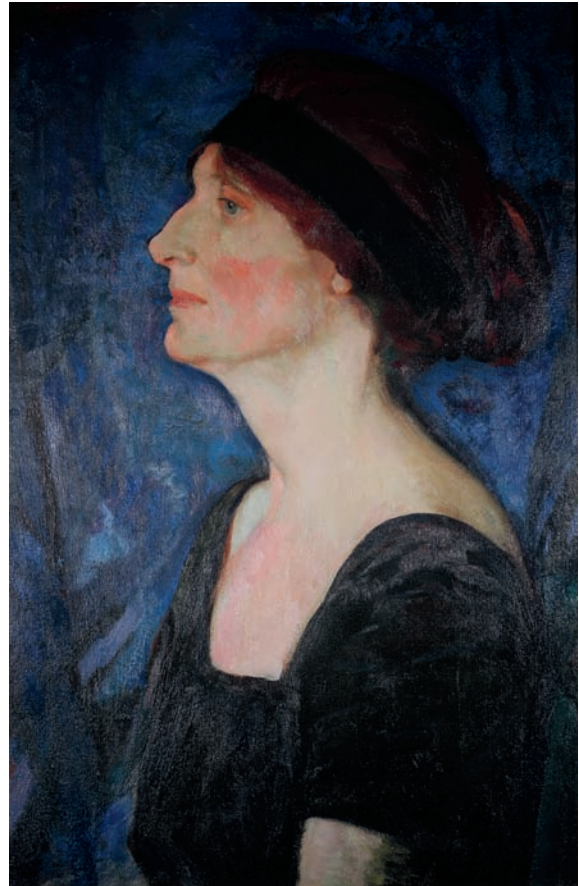
The Masseys let Milne know right away that they planned not to keep the works together as his letter proposed, but to exhibit some of the pictures for resale and to spend any net profits on “further examples of Canadian art.”¹¹ Under Alice Massey’s initiative, Mellors Galleries in Toronto had a show late that year, and most of the show went on to James Wilson and Co. in Ottawa and then to Scott and Sons in Montreal. There were some sales from those exhibitions and more shows with Mellors, altogether almost twenty exhibitions over the next few years in the three cities.¹²

Milne and Alice Massey corresponded warmly through all the first exhibitions and for some years afterward, she sending him brief notes together with art magazines and reviews of his shows, he sending painting reports and casual news from his environment, never mentioning the challenges of living alone month after month and rarely discussing the dark days when painting went badly.

Milne in his lifetime wrote many hundreds of pages of expansive, unhurried letters. “As a conversationalist and letter writer,” said someone who knew him in both

Fig. 2.2

Frederick Horsman Varley, *Portrait of Alice Massey*, ca. 1924–25. Oil on panel, 61.5 × 41.0 cm. Collection of the Varley Art Gallery of Markham. Purchase, Varley-McKay Art Foundation, 2003.3.1.



capacities, “he was shrewd, dispassionate, and poetic and he preferred to write his letters (presumably after careful drafting and rewriting) on the best rag paper.”¹³ With a striking consistency of tone, the letters track both his life and his artistic successes and failures, and they form a vivid record of the discovery of his “motives.” Before 1934 most of the letters were directed to James Clarke, but now Milne sent many to Alice Massey. I include below excerpts from a few of these showing how his laconic notes on everyday cabin life are interwoven with thoughts on painting, general and particular, in this new phase of his career. The last excerpt, from 1 July 1935, is about a picture using the “bright blue motive,” which went a little beyond his usual method of structuring with values (blacks, whites, and/or greys) and then adding colour separately and sparingly. This letter is a typical description of a day of work.

The letters from and to Six Mile Lake were one important part of the writing that followed Milne’s amazing August 1934 letter to the Masseys. The other part is what was written about him. All the first Canadian critical writing on Milne’s painting came out of the exhibitions arranged under the Masseys, and reviews were published in each of the cities where the shows were mounted.¹⁴ For the very first show, in order to create “some dignified publicity,”¹⁵ the Masseys hired Donald Buchanan, a twenty-six-year-old University of Toronto graduate from Lethbridge,

Alberta, who had studied briefly at Oxford, gone on to Paris, and returned to Canada in 1932 with a taste for French art and culture.* He lived in Ottawa, wrote newspaper articles, and had served as parliamentary correspondent for Toronto's *Saturday Night*, and he had just started a Carnegie-financed museum administration apprenticeship at the National Gallery when the Masseys contacted him. After an evening with the Masseys and their Milnes, Donald Buchanan went to Six Mile Lake one October weekend. A friendship and an exchange of letters began between Milne and this francophile art lover half his age.

Buchanan wrote a brief piece for the Mellors exhibition brochure as well as some longer articles; an excerpt from one published in the *Canadian Forum* follows this narrative. In these articles he situated Milne within the painting tradition of Matisse and the fauves, not as a follower but as an artist whose approach is similar, and Buchanan suggests in the *Forum* piece that from this perspective, Milne's aestheticism is a challenge to Depression-era regional painting in the US and its propagandizing. In a part of the article not included below, Buchanan also quotes faithfully from Milne on the subjects of his motives and the compositional importance of values. This is one of the very few occasions when any critic referred to Milne's own painstakingly worked out ideas on the evolution of his painting.

Buchanan wrote a shorter and more colourful piece, "Milne – An Artist in a Forest Hut," which appeared on 2 November 1934 in the *Lethbridge Herald* (owned by his father) and which came out a month later in a rearranged version in Toronto's *Saturday Night*. The *Saturday Night* piece, which Milne found "clearly put and discerning,"¹⁶ played his life at Six Mile Lake against his positively French sophistication:

I should never have thought that such water-lilies, as modern in spirit as an interior of light steel and fabric furniture in the rooms of one of those new flats off the Bois de Boulogne in Paris, could have been painted by a man in an old blue jacket and skiing pants. But I have seen him now in a hut in the woods, have slept on patches of dried moss brought in from the edge of the swamp, and he has told me of another cabin on the shores of Lake Temagami, where he painted water-lilies all one summer in 1929. So I know better now and I know that the mind can distill as delicate a pattern from the leaves and trunks of the raw forest or from a deal table with a washbasin and a pot of geraniums as from the pleached and faded trees of the Royal Gardens at Versailles.¹⁷

* Buchanan's parents, Senator and Mrs W.A. Buchanan, were part of the Anglo-Canadian Liberal establishment like the Masseys; Alice Massey had written to Alma Buchanan that "we read all Don's articles with great interest ... I only wish he could be one of those to really help us all in the work of the new liberalism" (Alice Massey to Alma Buchanan, 18 October 1933, box 67, file 08, Vincent Massey Personal Records).

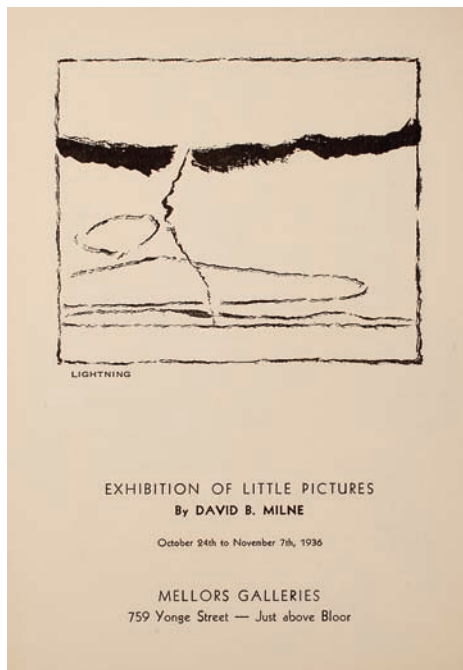


Fig. 2.3

Cover, Mellors Galleries catalogue to the *Exhibition of Little Pictures by David B. Milne, October 24th to November 7th, 1936*. Ink on paper. Catalogue: 21.5 × 16 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario, gift of the Milne Family Collection, 2009, LA.MF.809.1r. Whereabouts of drawing unknown.

The brochure included Milne's notes for some of the pictures in the show, including *Lightning*, on the cover: "Pictures usually have more lines and colors than this. Perhaps this is because this one comes from nature at her fastest. If you are to see your lightning picture as a whole instead of in parts, you have just one look, the shortest of looks. Half a dozen lines set in order by three black and white values and one hue, that's all there is. Simple, but not as simple, or as quickly seen, as lightning."

An article by Kenneth Wells of the *Toronto Telegram* used the backwoods idea to create a different image. "Deep in the bush, as the seasons came and went, David Milne painted. Deep in the bush he still paints. And though his pictures now hang in Mellor's Gallery on Yonge Street, and though the Canadian art world will soon be whispering, and then shouting, the news of the greatest contribution to Canadian art since the advent of Tom Thomson, the bush still holds him."¹⁸ This critic, invoking the legend of Tom Thomson, who in the public imagination had lived and died a bushwhacker, turns Milne into a romantic figure carrying out a masculine Canadian dream that "gnaws at the heart of civilized man."

Kenneth Wells's review and Buchanan's *Saturday Night* piece were two of a few responses to the first show that Alice Massey sent to Milne, and in thanking her for those Milne wrote, "I am disappointed in Kenneth Wells, so far as I have seen his great virtue is in his outspokenness, sometimes verging on crabbedness. The best he could do for me was to coo like a dove."¹⁹ He was more impressed with Pearl McCarthy's piece in the *Mail and Empire*, which "shows penetration and approaches the thing from the aesthetic standpoint ... it is encouraging to find any Canadian critic trying to get at the heart of the pictures themselves."²⁰ McCarthy, an important Toronto critic from 1929 to 1964, had in her review something approaching Milne's own idea of aesthetic emotion: "These colors may not be the colors one sees in actuality, and yet Milne's villages and countrysides cause to rise in the observer the exact impressions and emotions such scenes evoke. The difference is that Milne's paintings bring those feelings to their quintessence."²¹

Another young writer, Graham McInnes, grew fascinated with Milne upon seeing his work at Mellors. McInnes had become *Saturday Night's* art critic shortly after his 1934 arrival in Toronto from Australia at age twenty-two.* McInnes's

* Educated to the master's level in history and English, McInnes came with quite a pedigree: his family included a novelist mother, a musician father, his mother's cousin Rudyard Kipling, and his great-grandfather, the Pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones.



perspective was pure Clive Bell modernism, and what made Milne so exciting, he said of the spring 1935 show at Mellors, was an “innate appreciation of significant form which has led him, partly instinctively, partly by long and painstaking practice, to eliminate the non-essential, to subordinate everything secondary to his central idea.”²²

McInnes also reviewed a later 1935 Mellors exhibition, and in that review he shows once again how important the presence of the critical language of Clive Bell and Roger Fry was to what was replacing the nationalist rhetoric of the Group of Seven and their allies. And Milne spoke that language as fluently as his critics. Although he wrote to McInnes in 1938 that he had only just read Fry’s *Vision and Design* – “Here have I, with great effort and at great expense, been forming some of these fine ideas, then Roger Fry steps in and says them first”²³ – he certainly knew Bell’s *Art* much sooner.

Graham McInnes shifted his thinking a little as he and his circle of Toronto intellectuals and artists became more aware of the urgent social and political issues of the thirties (the subject of the fourth chapter of this book). Significant form was essential, yes, but art must also serve society. He complained, in a November 1936 review, when he found Milne becoming a little too “conceptual,” moving too far

Fig. 2.4
Milne, David, *Lightning*, 1936. Oil on canvas, 31.80 × 36.70 cm. MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of Regina Collection. Gift from the Douglas M. Duncan Collection. 1970-018. Photograph: MacKenzie Art Gallery.

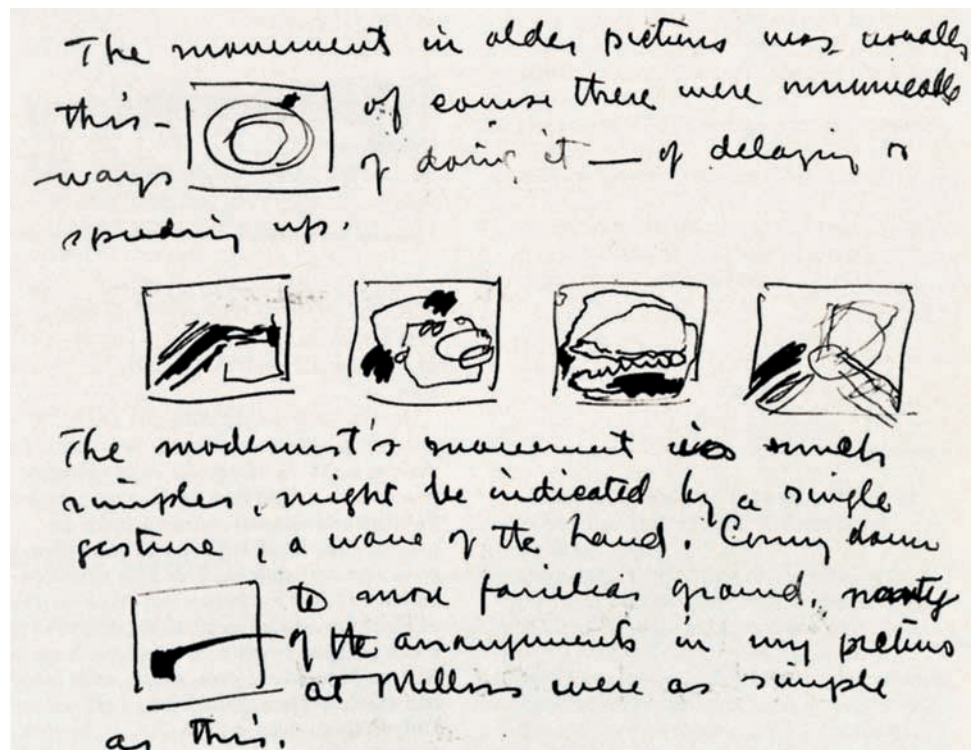


Fig. 2.5

"A wave of the hand" – letter from Milne to Graham McInnes, 16 February 1938. David Brown Milne fonds, Library and Archives Canada.

On the previous page of this letter Milne wrote that "most pictures – except perhaps portraits – up to Monet's haystacks might be called 'browsing' pictures, detailed, complicated, so that they couldn't be completely grasped at one glance, a bit of further exploration was invited and rewarded ... Most modernist painting is so simple that the whole picture can be grasped at one glance, is practically instantaneous."

On this page he elaborates with words and drawings. "The movement in older pictures was usually this – of course there were innumerable ways of doing it – of delaying or speeding up. The modernist's movement is much simpler, might be indicated by a single gesture, a wave of the hand. Coming down to more familiar ground, many of the arrangements in my pictures at Mellors were as simple as this."

The letter is a rare example of Milne placing himself with "the modernists," who are usually *they* in his letters – the cubists and other French artists of the early twentieth century (e.g., 19 March 1931 letter to McCurry, 3 October 1932 letter to Clarke, 7 January 1932 letter to McCurry, ca. 7 December 1934 letter to Alice Massey). When he told Clarke his reasons for approaching the Masseys he said that it was hard to market his pictures since they were "neither academic nor modernistic, fit in with nothing else particularly" (Letter from Milne to Clarke, 29 September 1934).

"in the direction of the ivory tower." "To deny to Mr. Milne, possibly the greatest artist at work in Canada today, the right to resolve his own problems according to his own lights would be presumptuous, but his method of resolving them means that those to whom his art is accessible have their ranks thinned." In a January 1937 letter in which he responded to Milne's comments on that review, McInnes showed that he understood how much Milne craved just this kind of cordial opposition. "'Art is a product of feeling, not will,' you say. Absolutely right. But what about this? Without feeling you can have *no* art. Without will you can have only

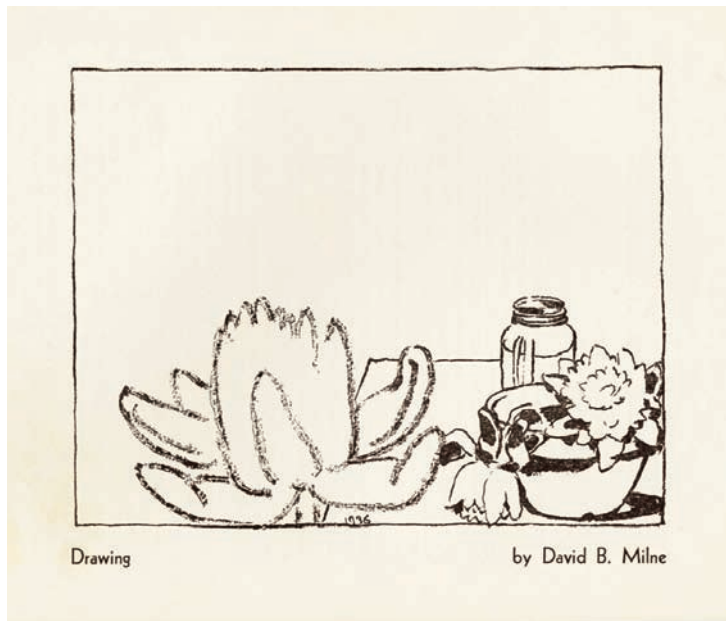


Fig. 2.6

David Milne, drawing for Alan Jarvis's article "Notes on Two Canadian Artists," as reproduced in *The Undergraduate* (University of Toronto) 6, no. 1 (1936), 36. Ink, printed dimensions 12.7 × 16.6 cm. Whereabouts of original unknown. Image courtesy of University of Toronto Archives and Records Management Services.

A drawing specially made by Milne to accompany Alan Jarvis's *Undergraduate* article. Milne explained to Jarvis that "it makes use of the photographer's curse – something in the way, out of focus. If you feel an inclination to take a few inches off the top and an inch off the side, resist it. The inclination is all right but the blank space has its effect. The space above drives you down to the lower part of the drawing, that at the left shoves you over. The vaguely marked big waterlily sends you to the more definitely marked and accented shapes in the right hand corner – concentration" (Letter from Milne to Alan Jarvis, 15 January 1936, Letters to Alan Jarvis, box 2, file 5, David Brown Milne fonds, AGO).

In his article Alan Jarvis said, "Milne is concerned primarily with line and pattern. His method is, therefore, to brush in, in detail, all the line first and this drawing is made 'more readable' by the addition of values and colour ... 'If the drawing could be made completely readable by the use of values,' Milne has written, 'there would be no need for colour.' ... To heighten the forcefulness of his compositions Milne has developed a number of original pattern-schemes [Milne's "motives"] the most notable of which is the use of blank space." Jarvis thus addressed the work from Milne's own point of view, as did Donald Buchanan, the other young critic who came to know Milne personally. All the other critics, as well as the Masseys and the galleries with which they made arrangements, ignored the record of artistic concerns that Milne had so carefully worked out.

partially realized art."²⁴ And McInnes became another of the few people who were welcome at Six Mile Lake.

What Milne set in motion with his long letter to the Masseys had further and larger consequences. Nineteen-year-old University of Toronto student Alan Jarvis, art reviewer for the campus newspaper, had also visited the first Mellors show. "Please go and see this exhibition, it is one of the more important events in Canadian art," he urged his readers. "Milne's work has an indestructible haunting beauty which could be expressed more easily in music than in prose – the paint sings on

the canvas and the colours vibrate and echo with superb clarity.”²⁵ The following summer, Jarvis got Douglas Duncan to see Milne’s work. Duncan was another francophile, a thirty-two-year-old with a family income just large enough to allow him to spend his time pursuing his love of books, music, art, and summers abroad. He had been in Paris from 1925 to 1928, where he learned the craft of fine bookbinding. Jarvis wrote later that “we were sufficiently captivated by the Milne painting that we resolved to see the mythical character in the flesh, and so we made our way, by car and canoe, to Six-Mile Lake in the summer of 1935. When we had hauled the canoe ashore on a bare point of rock on which stood a small tar-paper shack, Milne emerged and walked shyly down toward us. With mock solemnity and a courtly bow, DMD said: ‘We have just come to burn a little incense.’ That was the beginning of a relationship which was to become the most remarkable in the history of Canadian art.”²⁶

Two years later Duncan together with a half-dozen other people founded the Picture Loan Society, a low-cost art rental and sales gallery for which he would soon assume full responsibility. He and Jarvis made other trips to Six Mile Lake, and both corresponded with Milne. Milne appointed himself an occasional adviser to Jarvis, who was making art while he finished his bachelor’s degree, and when Jarvis won a Rhodes Scholarship in 1937, Milne gave a “parental blessing.”²⁷ Duncan became less a bookbinder and book collector and more a collector of pictures, including a great many Milnes. The Milnes stored in the States were eventually shipped to Duncan (“God, those watercolours are beautiful! Will you sell me a dozen or two?”),²⁸ and in 1938, when Milne opted out of his arrangement with the Masseys, having found over time that it tied up his output, distracted him from painting, and brought him very little profit, Duncan became his sole agent. Milne had his first Picture Loan Society show that December and annual shows after that,

Fig. 2.7
David Milne, Douglas
Duncan, Alan Jarvis,
1936. Photograph,
Milne Family Papers.

On the back of this
photo, Duncan wrote,
“Three poor pictures
with their respective
artists; all six out of
focus. DBM, DMD and
AJ at the entrance to
Pretty Channel, Six-Mile
Lake, Sept. 2, 1936.”



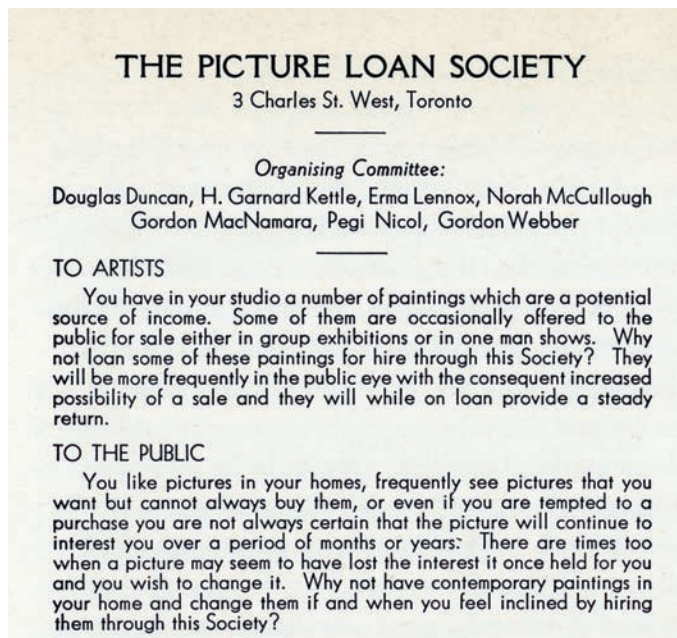


Fig. 2.8

Introduction to an advertisement for the Picture Loan Society, n.d. From Douglas Duncan: *A Memorial Portrait*, edited by Alan Hepburn Jarvis (University of Toronto Press, 1974), 52.

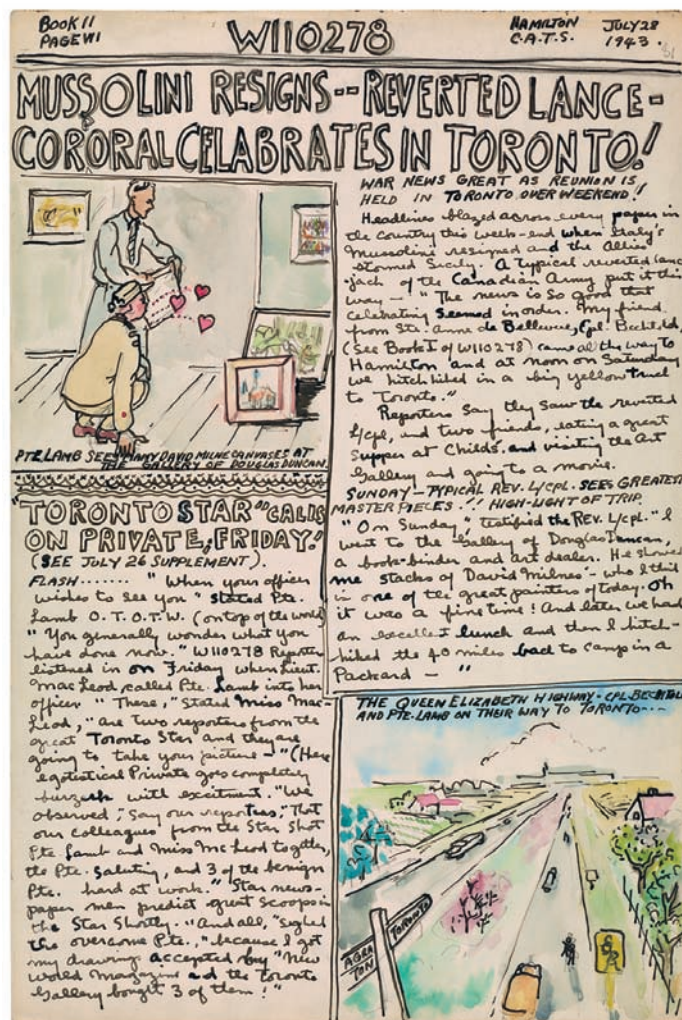


Fig. 2.9

Molly Lamb, *Lamb in Douglas Duncan's Gallery / The Queen Elizabeth Highway*, 1943. Watercolour over pencil on wove paper, support 30.5 x 45.6 cm. © Library and Archives Canada. Reproduced with the permission of Library and Archives Canada. Source: Library and Archives Canada / Molly Lamb Bobak and Bruno Bobak fonds / e011161027.

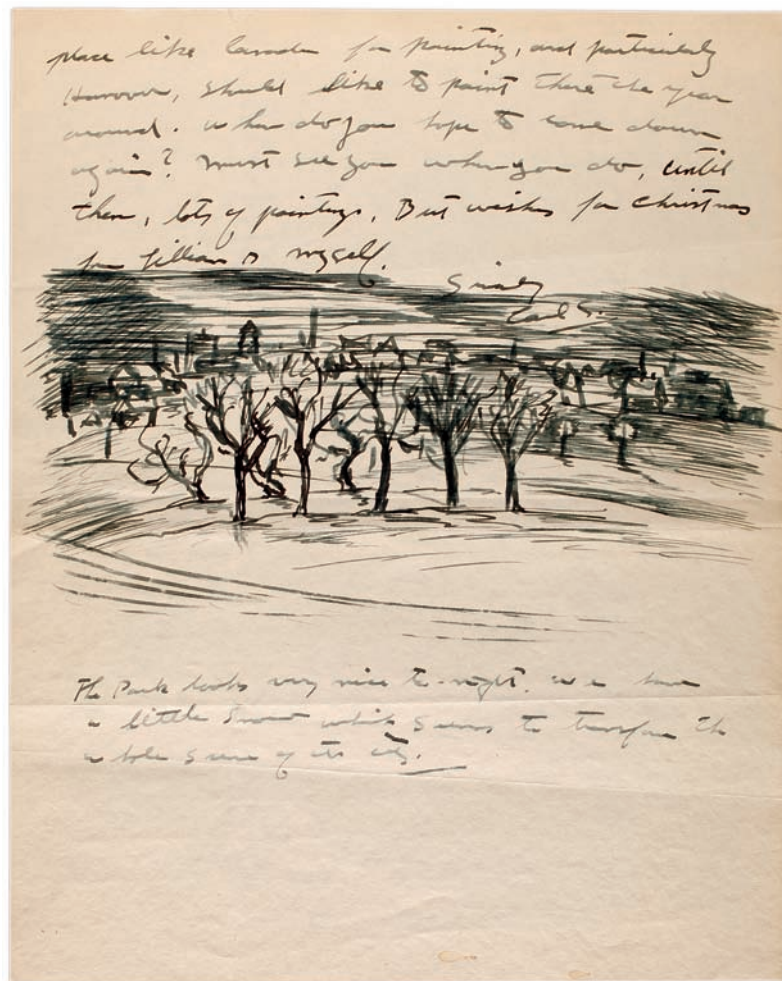
Molly Lamb, then in the Canadian Women's Army Corps, worked on 'w110278' - *The Diary of a C.W.A.C.*, a broadsheet-like "diary," from 2 November 1942, just after she enlisted, until June 1945, by which time she had become the only woman to be named an official war artist. On this sheet from 28 July 1943, she wrote next to the drawing at the upper left, "I went to the gallery of Douglas Duncan, a book-binder and art dealer. He showed me stacks of David Milnes - who I think is one of the great painters of today. Oh it was a fine time! And later we had an excellent lunch and then I hitchhiked the 40 miles back to camp in a Packard."

Fig. 2.10

Carl Schaefer, from a letter to David Milne, 21 December 1938. Ink on paper. Letter: 25.5 × 20.5 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario, gift of the Milne Family Collection, 2009. LA.MF.617.2v.

"When do you hope to come down again? Must see you when you do, until then, lots of painting. Best wishes for Christmas from Lillian and myself, Carl S.

The park looks very nice to-night. we have a little snow which seems to transform the whole scene of the city."



and Duncan ensured Milne's participation in other Canadian exhibitions.²⁹ Duncan could be maddeningly irregular about answering mail and keeping appointments and getting Milne's money to him, but Milne would now have at least a modest return on his work.

Milne came to know other artists in Toronto, including Paraskeva Clark and Charles Comfort. On one of his Toronto visits he met the young painter Carl Schaefer, and the two became good friends, starting a correspondence that Schaefer would cherish all his life.

These artists, and the critics and collectors and galleries I have mentioned, all became part of a context of support for Milne's art and life, and part of what Andrew Nurse called the "modern artistic field"³⁰ that was emerging in Toronto. Milne did not become widely known in the thirties, or even by the time of his death in 1953. Montreal critic Rodolphe de Repentigny commented in a review of the National Gallery's 1956 Milne retrospective that his public had been "un petit

groupe d'amis et de connaisseurs" until this retrospective gave him the national attention he deserved.³¹

But looking at what he wrote to this little group of friends and connoisseurs, and what they wrote to and about him, we see that while he lived at Six Mile Lake Milne managed to get from Toronto some of what he longed for: a vital connection with those who spoke his aesthetic language. It probably didn't affect his work apart from the modest financial benefit, since he was already a fully formed painter and an articulate writer on art when he returned to Canada, but the very act of interchange, the play of opposition and agreement, was clearly stimulating, and a most welcome relief to an artist living and working alone all these years. And of course, as the eastern Canadian context for art grew, he added something tremendously important to it.

DISCOVERING DAVID MILNE: ARTISTS' AND CRITICS' WRITINGS

This section includes important examples of the letters and critical writing that followed from the initiative Milne took in writing to the Masseys.

The excerpt from Donald Buchanan's 1935 article reflects the growing receptiveness in English Canada for what Bertram Brooker called the third movement in Canadian painting, with its openness to international critical currents.

The excerpts from four of the letters Milne sent to Alice Massey in 1935 show how carefully and how diffidently Milne set his working process and his formal concerns against a background of daily life at the edge of Six Mile Lake. The letters evoke an image of a lone writer who delights in his contact with an intelligent and interested correspondent. They also show that for Milne, as for Lawren Harris and other members of the former Group of Seven – although he had little else in common with them – art was a romantic address to nature, what Northrop Frye called "the direct imaginative confrontation with the North American landscape."³² But with Milne it was a life practice. (Graham McInnes said: "Milne and the Group have this much in common – they are all romantics. But whereas the Group's romanticism spread from subject matter to method and technique, and thence to aesthetic precepts, Milne's romanticism finds little place in his work, except insofar as it influences his choice of subject matter.")³³

Following the letters are excerpts from two of McInnes's reviews of Milne exhibitions, in which we see a shift in the critic's thought; then, Milne's marvellous response to Donald Buchanan's biography of James Wilson Morrice. This letter is perhaps most important for what it suggests about Milne himself, and for reflecting his enjoyment of "the play of opposition and agreement."

Finally, there is a reflection on Milne's painting from a 1935 letter written by the poet Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau. It is perhaps the most thoughtful and beautiful critique of Milne's work ever written, and it is a pity Milne never saw it.

Donald W. Buchanan, from "David B. Milne," 1935*

The Canadian Forum regularly reproduced contemporary Canadian drawings and other works, and a contemporary drawing by Milne, "Paper Bag," appeared with this article. Buchanan was a contributing editor of the Forum from 1935 to 1937, and this is one of several pieces he wrote in 1935.

The paintings of this Canadian have only recently been introduced, through exhibitions in Toronto and elsewhere, to most of us. This, at long last, for the man is now fifty-two years of age.

His work is, we should like to think, a challenge to the demand of Thomas Craven, the author of *Modern Art*,[†] that painters on this continent must shun, like the forces of Satan, that restrained, personal aestheticism which characterizes modern French painting. Mr. Craven wants the harsh realities of American life to be spread flamboyantly for us in rich pigment; but the poet, no matter what his medium or his nationality, will always see life differently from the propagandist.

Mr. Milne, although he never went to Paris to study, and has always been content with his little rural villages in upper New York State or in Ontario, has produced, through a mere attempt to be himself, delicate, sweetly logical landscapes of barns and wide-porched farmhouses, of water-lilies in enamel wash-basins on deal tables that remind one, neither of barn-dances nor of Mr. Hepburn,[‡] but rather of the bitter tang, the quick dry vitality of a glass of French vermouth which one sips with a surety that comes from relief and satisfaction in a life that has its bounds on the near horizon.

This artist, who, since 1929 and at intervals before, has lived in Canada, has frequented Temagami and Ottawa, Palgrave on the banks of the Ontario Huron, and now Muskoka, is a man who has passed as an equal with a generation of United States painters through most of the influences that have been bringing painting on this continent to maturity during the twentieth century. He received his training at the Art Students' League in New York City, he lived there until the war years; in 1919 he was preparing, in France and England, water-colours for the Canadian war memorials collection, and since then he has dwelt and absorbed in small hamlets the atmosphere of rural North America. Born in Bruce County, Ontario, he taught school for a while in Canada; then, as a young man in New York, he saw pass before him the exciting experiments of modern art. In the famous Armories Exhibition of 1913, when the canvases of Picasso, Matisse, and the others, arrived to astonish the Americans, Milne was among the New York artists who had pictures hung in the same show.

* Donald W. Buchanan, from "David B. Milne," *Canadian Forum* 15, no. 173 (February 1935): 191-3.

† Thomas Craven, *Modern Art: The Men, the Movements, the Meaning* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1934). Craven led the conservative critical direction toward realism in American art between the world wars, a direction of which English Canadian art circles were very aware.

‡ Mitchell Hepburn, a populist politician who won the Ontario premiership in 1934.

Impressionism influenced him (the broken, blunted contours that indicate his draughtsmanship are a sign of this); the later emphasis on broad contrasts of colour masses as seen in Gauguin and Matisse also had their effect.

The stream of art flows broadly across the western world, and no painter that is alive in his youth and maturity can escape the ideas that spread about him. But Milne has been a man who has absorbed slowly, with deliberation. You cannot point anywhere in his work and say that he is of this master or that, for he is not. Alone, from all these influences, he has found his own way of expressing that sure persistent application of feeling and calm reaction to the simple scenes about him. One senses that he has never lost his roots, that he is still the young man who, at twenty-two, was teaching school in the country north of Toronto, a farmer's son, or to distinguish him more closely than that, a man of rural Ontario whose spirit, whose emotional outlook, has not changed with the knowledge his eyes have drunk in elsewhere over the years, and that in Muskoka or in some community like Palgrave, Ontario, he shows us that a Canadian, as well as any Frenchman, can have delicacy, restraint, and a little of logic, in his mind and art.

David Milne, from a letter to Alice Massey, 8 March 1935*

When I think of these exhibitions, and of how beautifully they are being done – for I hear echoes of the ones I don't see – and of the time and thought and enthusiasm that it must take to do them this way, I feel that I must surely have exhausted the generosity and kindness of Mr. and Mrs. Massey. But no, here is a thoughtful look to the future.[†]

My plans have been concerned entirely with painting, to stay just where I am for a while and pursue the half dozen motives that are floating round – the bright blue, the dull blue, some of camp fires using smoke and flames and sparks both in daylight and dark – these have been stirred up and stirred up and never grasped with any completeness. The still lifes have fared a little better. I got quite a kick out of two done the week before I came to Toronto, one of the cabin shelves, with the flour bag, lamp, jam jar, honey pail, salt jar, bowl (the Christmas pudding one) and other very nice looking things. The byproducts, the pictures themselves haven't had a thought, except that I have felt great satisfaction in remembering our arrangement, that they are to pass before the sympathetic eye of Mr. and Mrs. Massey before anything is planned about them. Can we add anything to that without becoming a nuisance to you and without making me think of pictures instead of painting.

* Milne's original pencil drafts of these letters are in box 2, file 23, of the David Brown Milne fonds, Art Gallery of Ontario. The versions he sent to Alice Massey are in box 376, files 16 and 17, Papers of Alice Massey.

† Alice Massey had asked Milne in a letter of 2 March to "think out some sort of business arrangement that we can make for a year or so."

That's one difficulty, it is fatal for me to work toward a known end. As soon as I say "I want to have enough pictures for an exhibition in a year or in two years or in any time," I chill, solidify and everything is off. Have I quoted the Munsey cover incident to you? * No doubt I have – several times. It is one of my classics, marks the discovery of the unruly spirit that prevents my steering for a mark. My only way seems to be to keep hammering at the painting; after a while I am pretty sure to discover that I have quite a few pictures.

David Milne, from a letter to Alice Massey, 16 April 1935

I have been buried in the sugar bush most of the time since I came back from Toronto. I made five quarts of maple syrup and did a lot of painting. I felt that I was doing well and resisting temptations, when I kept the syrup down and the painting up. Most of the pictures are rubbed out, but I have got the original sugar bush one done and another, a little like it, going. There are also a few smaller ones. The most interesting thing in painting has been a canvas or two, small, away from my usual line of subjects. One night, a couple of weeks ago, as I was going to bed, I looked through the window and saw the northern lights. With the flashlight I made a pencil sketch. Then I noticed a bright star showing through the other window. I made another sketch. Next day I painted both. The Northern lights, after three paintings, came out rather well, a kick in it. The Evening star hasn't got there yet, it is now in the rubbed out stage, but it will be done again. This change in working method, which I have explained before, and which has been going on for a long time, throws open a new series of subjects that I have had in mind ever since I came here, particularly night ones. As usual the painting situation is promising, the performance so far isn't much. But it will even up.

I haven't written a thing, evenings I have looked at the day's work, tried to figure out where the kick was, or why there wasn't any. Today I am taking a day off. I have gone over the etchings and thinned them down, but it will take another session or two before I know which proofs to send. † I have two letters from you, and another set of magazines, the *Listeners*. Rather good, particularly some of the Art criticism. Then there was a Hart House Dramatic leaflet – which is interesting but away on my horizon, and a political tract – which I freely forgive – rather broad of me, I think. These are all interesting echoes of the Masseys' life – it would be still more interesting to know how they do it all. I lose myself completely in the sugar bush for a month and leave things undone and letters

* In about 1909 when Milne was trying to make a living as an illustrator in New York City, he got a commission for a magazine cover from the publisher Frank Munsey. After a long and frustrating series of submissions, the arrangement collapsed.

† Milne had been making colour drypoint etchings since 1922. These are catalogued and thoroughly discussed by Rosemary Tovell in *Reflections in a Quiet Pool: The Prints of David Milne*.

unwritten and some – not Mrs. Massey’s though – I know them from the outside as well as inside – some unopened. Of course it isn’t a matter of time, there is lots of time, it is just that one interest displaces all the others – and apparently, without much coming of it.

David Milne, from a letter to Alice Massey, 9 May 1935

I am going up to the Falls today, the first time for a while, and will take the dry-points that I spoke of with me. If you will stick them away somewhere, someone, sometime may find them and say, “poor fellow, how he must have suffered doing those.”

Still playing “blind man’s buff” and always the blind man, shutting out practically everything except the thin thread of painting. I haven’t written even short letters. I haven’t done the spring jobs round the cabin. I haven’t covered and painted the old canoe, the sled and tub and pails are still at the sugar bush. Lots of things I haven’t done and I rather like it. Yesterday I got quite a kick out of the thing I did – one of the, for me, larger size, of spring flowers. At least spring flowers are the excuse for it. Flowers and leaves sprawled over most of the bottom part of the canvas, near at hand, almost out of focus and away in one corner, crisp and strong and clear-cut the Christmas pudding bowl empty and another bowl with hepaticas and dogtooth violets. All the top part of the canvas, more than half of it, blank. I’m probably the only person in the world that would like it. Well, that’s the kind of stuff to do.

Not enough pictures to send out yet, and anyway there is no canoe to ferry them up, but there will be both after a while.

David Milne, from a letter to Alice Massey, 1 July 1935

I didn’t intend to paint today; I have been working on a larger than usual canvas of the cabin shelves and counted on resting it in the rubbed out stage for one day. The morning was spent on chores, mostly having to do with the rebuilt canoe. As I worked away, I occasionally glanced at the sky, white clouds, with streamers – against pure blue. I have tried this subject once in a while ever since I came here, it is very specially a Six Mile Lake subject; but, so far, have not had much luck with it. On the after-lunch walk round the rock I noticed it again and gradually slipped into the temptation to paint it. There is never much kick in these things so long as they are just sky and shoreline and water and rocks: they have to be translated very clearly into my assortment of shapes and spaces and hues and values before they are thrilling. In fact that is what makes us paint. First I tried it in my head and made some progress with the cloud shapes but I couldn’t relate them to the distant shore line & the water and the rocks in the foreground. There

is always a tendency in sky and earth or sky and water pictures to split them in two horizontally. The largest and most clearly defined shapes are usually toward the zenith and at your feet; until you make up your mind to sacrifice one to the other there is confusion. The mind drawing was just successful enough to lead me to pencil and paper. I marked the arrangement of the cloud shapes and the patches of still against ruffled water. While doing this I came to a decision about whether to emphasize the top, the bottom or – as sometimes one unfortunately does – both. Not only a decision – it isn't that simple – but a worked out decision, an exact way of doing it. That was the high point of the picture making and was enough to carry me through the actual painting. Not bad, the farthest I have got yet with the bright blue motive. The blue really works, it does something you couldn't do by any other means.

All this fuss, and more that I haven't set down, about a little canvas (16 × 20) with some patches of dark value, some more in two light values, a few invisible spots and streaks of dark red and purple and a large smear of bright blue; not particularly well drawn and with some confusion in the cloud shapes. Sounds dull and uninteresting, I know, but this little lifetime of an hour or so that you spend in front of a canvas is rather a complete and thrilling thing, with its birth development and completion.

Graham McInnes on a Milne exhibition, from his art column in *Saturday Night*, 1935*

When McInnes wrote this review he was the art critic for Saturday Night – it was one of the writing jobs that got him through his seven years in Toronto – and was still in his early twenties. He had started at the magazine in 1934 with only a little knowledge of European art and none of Canadian, but he learned fast and had a facility with words.³⁴ His Saturday Night art column ran weekly, except for summers, until 1939.

McInnes begins by mentioning Milne's exhibition of May–June 1935, which he had found “so exciting” because of an “innate appreciation of significant form.”³⁵

At Mellor's Galleries, David B. Milne has been holding his second One Man Show for the present year. It is in some respects even more interesting than his first, as the majority of the work has been completed this year, and one is able to note certain subtle changes taking place in the artist's method. The exhibition has been hung in such a way that Milne's gradual development towards extreme simplification is made clear.

* Graham McInnes, from “Art,” *Saturday Night* (Toronto), 30 November 1935, section 2, p. 11. By permission of Simon McInnes.

Mr. Milne is plainly struggling hard to find certain permanent, and in a sense purely representative values, through which to interpret the country that he knows and loves so well. It is perhaps not fanciful to see in Mr. Milne, buried deep in the Ontario backwoods, steeping himself in the trees, rocks and lakes, and moving more and more towards the expression in sparing line and dry punctilious brush-stroke of their variety and underlying unity, a parallel with Cézanne, buried deep in Provence and doing much the same sort of thing. In both cases the artists have, implicit in their almost ascetic austerity, a depth and a breadth of vision that strains to their limits the conditions imposed by paint and canvas.

Milne has been compared by some to Tom Thomson, but they are alike only in their great understanding of and sympathy for the North country, and in their intensity. But whereas Thomson's decorative talent and his brilliance as a colorist make his intensity at once evident, Milne's intensity appears at first to be dissipated among his broken lines, his disjointed patches of paint, and apparently empty bits of canvas. It is only after contemplation that the inevitability of Milne's nervous line, and his soft, subdued tones, as making up a highly concentrated essence of what he depicts, becomes apparent.

Graham McInnes on another Milne exhibition, from his *Saturday Night* column, 1936*

The Milne that one can see now at Mellors Galleries, 759 Yonge Street, is a new and exciting person. Or rather, he is not new so much as slightly reorientated in accordance with the evolution of his art. To any one who has followed closely the development of Mr. Milne's art, the present showing strikes with compelling logic. Many of the 1935 and most of the 1936 canvases show that aloofness, extraordinarily exacting simplification, extremely personal and curiously âpre quality, the beginnings of which were noticeable as far back as 1928. But I prefer his work executed in the years 1930–34, which achieved in my opinion, an excellence past comment.

To deny to Mr. Milne, possibly the greatest artist at work in Canada today, the right to resolve his own problems according to his own lights would be presumptuous, but his method of resolving them means that those to whom his art is accessible have their ranks thinned. And that, I think, is a great pity. With Mr. Milne, the wheel has come full circle. His process of selection has led him gradually away in the direction of the ivory tower. At that no one has the right to jibe: but to capture the inner quintessence of a subject is as hard as completely to understand the concepts of infinity and eternity. It can only be suggested, and to suggest it, compromise, and while it is this that makes him the great artist that he

* Graham McInnes, from "The World of Art," *Saturday Night* (Toronto), 7 November 1936, 23. By permission of Simon McInnes.



Fig. 2.11
David Milne in His Cabin at Six Mile Lake, ca. 1936–38. Photograph by Douglas Duncan. Library and Archives Canada.

is, it means that his later work is so conceptual that it almost vibrates in space like music. Its simplicity is so huge that it eludes our grasp and leaves us with a feeling of magnificent dissatisfaction – like those half-realized water colors of Cézanne’s final period.

But from each and every picture here, in varying degree, one can draw rich and living experiences. To spend half an hour before works such as “Canoe in Harbor,” or “Boulder in the Pool,” gives a rare and indescribable pleasure. But one must spend half an hour.

David Milne, from a letter to Donald Buchanan on the subject of Buchanan’s biography of Morrice, 1937*

Donald Buchanan had persuaded the National Gallery to let him use what remained of a Carnegie-funded museum administration apprenticeship to write a bi-

* David Milne, from a letter to Donald Buchanan, Severn Park, 19 January 1937; correspondence with/re artists: 7.1-M – Milne, David B. Box 266, file 2, National Gallery of Canada Library & Archives.

ography of the expatriate Canadian painter James Wilson Morrice and an appended catalogue. With the gallery's support and some additional Carnegie money, the efficient Buchanan did his research in Canada, England, and France and finished his manuscript before that year, 1935, was over. James Wilson Morrice: A Biography came out from Ryerson Press of Toronto late the following year. In it Buchanan emphasized that Morrice was modern, he was important, and he was thoroughly Canadian. In a sense, Buchanan was repatriating a painter who had lived and died abroad, and Milne, a recently repatriated Canadian artist, was in the very best position to appreciate the book.

The other day I was thinking of your book, remembering that you had chosen what I would call the research plan, not the dramatic or the emotional, as in, say, Meyer Graefe's *Van Gogh*.^{*} I decided that you were justified, that nobody could make a drama out of Morrice's rather commonplace existence. Now, I am not so sure. I am probably seeing Morrice through Buchanan's eyes, all I know of Morrice comes from his pictures, the Toronto University reprint[†] and your book. The pictures tell much, not only where he was but something of his working habits and a great deal about his inner life, more, perhaps, than his doings outside painting. His letters seem trivial, revealing nothing below the surface; his interminable journeyings, his dining and drinking suggest the art student who never grew out of his student-days habits. Probably these things never touched him deeply, they were no more than an escape, a rest from the deeper emotions of painting, which he hadn't the strength to sustain without the relief of trifling daily engagements.

This, it seems to me, suggests the reason for his final brilliant flaring up in the West Indies – I wish, in spite of the lack of material, you had attempted a fuller explanation of this, the most striking event of his art life. It is possible that toward the end of his life, probably inspired by Matisse, he found strength to break away from his fussy daily round and pitch himself headlong into painting.

One other thing that I would like to know, you fail to tell me. Why was Morrice a painter at all, why was he the only one of this large family to break away from the accepted ideal? Like all biographers I know anything about, you start in the middle. I am convinced that before he was eight, certainly before he was ten, Morrice's way was marked out in him, not, perhaps, that he was to be a painter, but at least that he was to break away from the indirectness and insincerity of the life he was born into. Nothing less than a searching inventory of the Morrice household in the early years of the painter's life would reveal the reason for Morrice. I feel sure that someone in close touch with him in those years

^{*} Julius Meier-Graefe, *Vincent van Gogh: A Biographical Study*, tr. John Holroyd-Reece (New York: Literary Guild of America 1933).

[†] Buchanan's article, "James Wilson Morrice," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (January 1936): 216–27.

moulded him in the way he was to go. It would have to be someone very close to him, more than likely his mother, if not the mother an aunt or other relative, possibly even a nurse, or most unlikely of all a man of the household. This is very difficult to trace, because the person sought would be out of sympathy with the family worship of success, to the Morrises an unimportant person, even a “black sheep.” They would never suspect such a person of having an influence on any one, they would probably not think of mentioning her or him. They might even deliberately cover up. Well, that’s quite a bit to ask of any biographer, particularly when close relatives are still alive. The most you could have done, probably, would have been to make a more complete and detailed inventory of the Morrice family in the first ten years of the painter’s life. Of course you may not agree about the importance of this.

I read the book through before Christmas and since then I have been going over parts of it again, slowly because I still keep from reading or writing much at night. Your greatest strength seems to me in your clear, flowing style. It is particularly effective in this style of book where the endless incidents, quotations and sources would be monotonous and confusing in most hands. Only in one chapter did I find myself unable to follow and grasp the detail – somewhere near the middle, dealing with associates in Paris.

Ryersons seem to have done a first class job. I notice no errors and the book seems well printed. Black and white reproductions are fine and very helpful. I get little from the color one. I haven’t finished rereading the last few chapters – which are the most interesting to me. I may have something to say about these later, but through the rest of the book I have noted a few points.

“There is not a hint of illustration in Morrice” p.27. Very fine and the key to Morrice’s work. Remarkable too because most British, American and Canadian painters have been illustrators rather than painters. Among the mostly superficial statements in his letters and to his friends is this remarkably revealing one on p. 97: – “You should move, he would add, in a picture, from neatness to disorder.” Not very well expressed, but it was a painter’s thought, particularly an impressionist’s thought. It might almost be taken as a statement of the impressionists’ creed, the creed in which Monet so single heartedly believed, and against which Cezanne partially rebelled. What Morrice meant was that the artist should move from detail to unity, should sacrifice the parts to the whole, should even confuse and lose everything except the single statement of the whole. Monet did this, Morrice to a large extent, more perhaps than any except Monet (that is why he is a painter not an illustrator). Cezanne knew the importance of unity, but he refused to sacrifice everything to it, he wanted his “something solid,” that is something to get hold of, to start with, somewhere to enter the picture.

You explain his residence abroad and his trips very satisfactorily. You have been particularly thorough and remarkably successful in the Paris search. A few more years and it would have yielded nothing ...

Our art ideals and estimates probably differ quite a bit. I notice that you do not give as much credit to Whistler as I would. You think of him as muddy, I don't. I would trace that very lovely translucent quality of Morrice directly to Whistler.

A Coda: Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau on Milne, from a letter to Maurice Hébert, 1935*

Having seen the first Milne exhibition at Scott's in Montreal, the Quebec poet Saint-Denys Garneau wrote about the pictures in a letter to his cousin Maurice Hébert, also a poet and a literary critic. Garneau was part of a circle of writers who loved art and attended exhibitions together, and he himself had studied painting and pursued it quite seriously,³⁶ as the last paragraphs here reflect.

Dear Maurice,

I went to an exhibition of a Canadian artist who vaguely takes after the Fauves, or so they say, for I know little about the Fauves. It is one of the best exhibitions I've seen here.

David Milne is an Ontarian who retired to the woods so he could give himself to his muse, fill his eyes with the display of nature, wild and ragged, and conform it into strange paintings that reflect an extremely subjective vision.

When you first enter the room nothing extraordinary strikes you. You are only aware of a vast emptiness, a desolate monotony. It all escapes you and you don't know what to look for. Here, a jumble of houses, all in the same red with green roofs; a white sky above; empty spaces with patches of raw canvas. Over there, fields that ripple in green lines and a few trees contoured in black which separates them from everything else. All this without intelligible order, again with large empty spaces and skies smeared lightly so as not to cover the canvas completely. It is all very pleasant and you go around the room several times, let your gaze wander, let it rest haphazardly here and there. And little by little everything starts to sing, vibrate and come alive. Where it all seemed monotonous and similar, each painting acquires its own vitality and autonomy and radiates beyond the frame. Each one summarizes its own world, each one a point of departure, a centre of radiance.

Gradually you begin to understand why each painting, so different from the other that you can't walk by without astonishment, initially gave the impression of uniformity. It is because they have not been painted in *relief*. The colourings

* Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau, from a letter to Maurice Hébert, 29 April 1935; published long after Garneau's death in his *Oeuvres*, edited by Jacques Brault and Benoît Lacroix (Montreal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1971), 951–5. Translation © Lola Lemire Tostevin. This translation was first published in Toronto as "A Letter from Saint-Denys Garneau" in *Brick: A Journal of Reviews* no. 38 (Winter 1990): 24–6, and I include it here with Lola Tostevin's kind permission.

extend beyond the frame but none springs out from within the frame or sinks into the wall: they are flat. They are without depth: only a simple juxtaposition of colours and empty spaces on a flat background. The subject is so unimportant that many of the canvases could be turned upside down. To do so would merely displace their centre of gravity and change their sense of balance.

Yet these are not merely empty spaces. Mr. Milne is not a fraud. His intensity asserts itself as you penetrate its expression and begin to understand the vision that informs it. Milne is partly impressionist but his is not an instant impressionism. One senses behind each painting an accumulation in which resides an anterior meaning: an accumulation of nature, of landscape, which has become part of the man until his vision conforms to it and informs his art. The impression is long and lived. It is not intellectual art, it is untamed with a sense of fatalism in its sweeping accumulation; but all this is felt by the artist, or rather it is subjected to a profound intensity. Some critics insist that it is instant impressionism, even whimsical, but I find quite the opposite to be true. Each landscape is but a spark through which a profound spirit finds a pretext to express itself: an untamed spirit not entirely aroused by nature and chaos but not entirely free of its appeal.

The subjects, the pretexts for these paintings are limited in number. Fields populated by a few trees where green waves overlap; a bare elevation around which curves a railway track; a small black town made up of black and grey cubes with a few lively touches of green and red, as if dreamed, as if lost at the edge of a wilderness under a stark white and leaden sky; a street whose grey makes the red and green of the sharp angled houses sing; or a street bordered with grey houses against a sky that is half grey and half pasty white; a few olive leaves as a reminder that there is life in this gloom. Winter in its last stages; white spaces surrounded or scattered with branching, leaves about to sprout, or a network of trunks in tangled violent lines; roots half-buried in snow; chaotic desolate spaces where all vegetation is banished and only a ray of light survives. There is the shock of an orange earth and a grey sky that explodes like a bomb; sharp mountain ridges under clouds of firm broken lines. All this is apprehended rather than seen, like an unarticulated song that lingers long after it has ended.

You could summarize the range of this artist by two or three dominant modes: endless bleakness and desolation; clash of elements with little relief, radiant and explosive joy. And always, behind these, there is an infinite, permanent nature (perhaps all of nature but certainly what is most characteristic of our own landscapes) and the sharp perception with which it is emphasized.

His technique, which is most interesting, has been reduced in order to render more effectively the elementary impressions of a universal spirit: wonder, desolation, joy.

His colours, like the emotions expressed, are not varied. They can be placed within three categories, each one corresponding to a state of mind and which,

according to the prevalence of one over the other, establish the mood of the painting.

Lead grey and black – orange, green, and red – blue and lighter grey and a few violet, mauve and fawn derivatives. And some white, to blend, isolate or lighten. For a town of lively houses, he uses grey as foreground which accentuates the cheerful harmony of green and red with sunny touches of orange against an empty white sky. He often isolates elements with a heavy dark line so that there is no relation of perspective. A few grey spaces and a succession of cube houses in blotches of green, as if to summon light, are scattered throughout a dark town emphasized by a stark white sky above.

Milne is unconcerned with subject matter and approximates the last stage of Matisse's art in that the symmetry of his paintings resides in the distribution of colour and the arrangement of empty spaces and filled areas instead of subject matter. Milne sometimes uses empty space excessively, but obtains striking results nevertheless. He creates an affinity between two colours as if they had joined hands and were singing a duet across the emptiness, like two melodies that extend themselves by offsetting each other. This prevails especially in the relation of lines separating the empty spaces: the coloured areas could be compared to musical chords, not the full chords of a Chopin or a Beethoven, but a modern harmony where two notes answer each other from two different clefs, either in harmony or in dissonance, or even in the style of Bach's fugues where the melody is elaborated in bounds and rhythmic succession. All this is accomplished through very careful proportions, although at times the spaces are not filled in relation to two forms, two tones or lines and the effect can simply be barren and excessive.

Just as colour yields a sense of impression, a line expresses rhythm. In Milne's paintings, the two often merge, as in Bach or Stravinsky's last works, when the line, a progression of strokes, a surge of colour, surrounds emptiness. When long, sinuous and repeated, the lines overlap and give the impression of expanse and boredom and recall Baudelaire's "the deserted plains of profound boredom." And how deserted! The violent and hard broken lines, the outbursts are as sharp among clouds as among rocks, the clashes. Or the lively rhythm of jostled houses and trees that erupt like laughter, and the gradual but sure awakening of slow curves.

What I like in all this is how the purity and strength of Milne's technique reflects certain aspects of nature as we know it. I don't know if I have spoken to you about the difficulty I've experienced in trying to capture our wilderness without weighing it down. I've been experimenting with a form that approximates the predominance of the mystical line in Chinese art, where colour, the material mass, is indicated only by a contouring line. Well! I have now come across a most interesting realization of this vague dream. Milne has communicated to me how to fill empty space which had become my greatest obstacle.

Undoubtedly the technique is incomplete. It seems to me that the arrangement of the subject should not be entirely without importance, but rather should determine colour and space. Also it lacks the elevated and mystic elements that I'm searching for, that fine point of awareness that moves the line towards the intangible as in a melody by Mozart. There is, however, great strength and the technical elements, reduced to their essential, summarize a purity, a primitive asceticism.

All in all it is a captivating exhibition. Something new and good at last. A tragic and untamed simplicity.

Emily Carr and the Wordless Speech of Things

There is a cold, mysterious wonder amid the trees. They are not so densely packed but what you can pass in imagination among them wondering what mysteries lie in their quiet fastness [...] I should like when I am through with this body & my spirit released to float up these wonderful mountain passes & ravines & feed on the silence & wonder, no fear no bodily discomfort. Just space & silence.

Emily Carr, November 1927

These words stand out among a scattering of mundane observations in the first pages of a pocket-sized journal Emily Carr kept on a train ride east through the mountains of British Columbia. In her journals over the following decade, Carr wrote often of longing – for companionship beyond the superficial, for approval from her family, for being out in nature, but mostly for what she felt every artist must have: “something beyond what he sees or can reach.” That “groping religiously, for something”¹ became the driving force in her art.

Anyone who reads her journals, long available in published form and now online, or who studies any of the great number of writings on her and her work, will know that she had a “return” to Christianity at the peak of her painting career. But it was no simple conversion. Trying to understand the course of her spiritual life, I have read and reread the journals, which are, in the words of Doris Shadbolt, who studied Carr and her work over many years, “most memorable as the intimate telling of her search to probe and clarify her closely related artistic and spiritual drives.”² The journals are the key to understanding her quest to find God in the natural world and in art. Her books do not speak of it.

The parts of Carr’s journals that are given over to the spiritual in art do reflect the larger romantic current in English Canadian art history, but on their own, they amount to an evocative and independent theorizing. They also form one of the most forthright and moving records of a spiritual search to be found in twentieth-century Western art.

The journal entries I have gathered below trace this search from the 1927 trip through the decade that was the height of her painting career.

Even while following this intense private search it is important to keep in mind that Carr lived through that decade within a certain social context. The cultural historian Andrew Nurse has explored how gender in particular affected Carr’s place in her hometown of Victoria, BC, as well as within the uneven development of a “modern artistic field” in Canada.”³ This new artistic field, unlike the old one, was

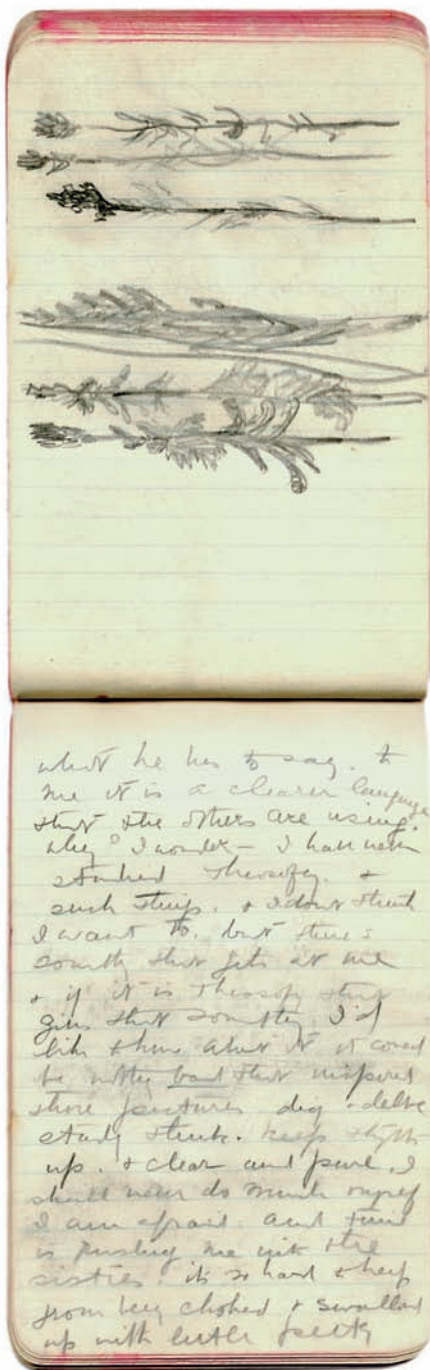


Fig. 3.1

Emily Carr, page for 25 December, Journal 1, 10 November–25 December 1927. Box 2, folder 14, MS-2181, Emily Carr Papers. Image courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives.

"I have never studied Theosophy & such things, & I don't think I want to, but there is something [in Harris's paintings] that gets at me & if it is Theosophy that gives that something I'd like to know about it."

supposedly gender-neutral, and Carr chose to treat it as such most of the time although she knew of course that it was not.⁴ While I can only refer briefly to Nurse's argument, which should be read in full, I have included in this chapter an excerpt from a public address Carr gave in 1930 that shows how she presents herself as an agent of the modern* to an audience in Victoria who knew of her new national reputation but who were, she felt, stuck in the older artistic field.



On that November train ride Carr mused about physical nature as a sort of heaven for her spirit. A week later, after a now-famous encounter with Lawren Harris and his work in Toronto, she wrote that the space and serenity of his paintings seemed to offer a clearer way to God, and her curiosity about his spiritual life led her to follow his recommendation and read a little Theosophy. This exploration, and their shared interest in art and the spiritual, became aspects of a deep long-distance friendship between Carr and Harris. Their letters to each other were "the first real exchanges of thought in regard to work I had ever experienced. They helped wonderfully he made many things clear & also the unaccustomed putting my own thoughts down in black & white helped me to clarify my own thoughts to find out my own aims & beliefs."⁵ With those letters and in the journals dating from this time, her thought grew and evolved.

Native art is strangely absent from Carr's journal writings about art and the spiritual throughout this decade, which followed the National Gallery's *Exhibition of West Coast Art – Native and Modern*, the show that she had travelled east to see, and one that has been much criticized for the appropri-

* But in writing of her own work she used the terms "modern art" and "the new art" only when exhibiting her work, in order to distinguish the paintings after 1927 from her earlier things.

tion of First Nations work by a white culture looking for a heritage.⁶ Although her pre-First World War paintings of Native villages and poles hung in that exhibition among more than three hundred works of the northwest coast First Nations, and although she spent time in the exhibition rooms sketching the Native works, all she said of them in her travel journal concerned a dismal opening night: “The grand old totems with their grave stern faces gazed tensely ahead,” as if her own evening’s disappointment mattered to them.⁷

A few years later, in one of the very few other journal entries that mention Native art, Carr says she is working on “a big totem, heavy woods behind,” and without referring to the pole again she goes on to the “nameless thing” she wants to express.⁸ That same week, speaking of a village with a “zunnoqua on the house-post,” she says, “I want the pole vague & the tangle of growth strenuous,”⁹ again leaving the pole aside to describe the atmosphere she is trying to get. In 1934, she speaks of Native art in a journal entry on forgetting the self: “Those old religious painters lived in their religion not themselves. Our B.C. Indians lived in their totems & not in themselves becoming the creature that was their ideal & guiding spirit. They loved it and were in awe of it and they experienced something. We must have awe & reverie but above all love of God if we want to express his creation.”¹⁰ Here, Native art was simply an example of an ideal, like those old religious painters.

It was a little different when Carr wrote for the public. A year and a half after the *Native and Modern* show she published the article “Modern and Indian Art of the West Coast,” in which she declared West Coast native art was “the most modern in spirit of anything in Western Canada” and “essentially ‘Canadian’ for in inspiration, production and material it is of Canada’s very essence and can take its place beside the art of any nation.”¹¹ This article added to the English Canadian conversation in which Native work was appropriated into the history of Canadian art. At a 1930 exhibition in Victoria of both her pre-First World War Native pictures and those done since 1927, she gave the public address I mentioned, and there she attempted to explain “creative art” – Lawren Harris’s term – in ways that her conservative audience might accept, using Clive Bell’s concept of aesthetic emotion, Roger Fry’s reference to different types of vision, and Harris’s ideas, in addition to her own. She included a statement identifying Native art with Canada and with the art she wanted her audience to embrace, a strategy in line with a nationalist ideology that helped early on to shape the “modern artistic field” in Canada, to go back to Andrew Nurse’s argument. However, what is most striking about that part of her speech is that she devoted only one long paragraph to First Nations art and people. The talk gives no more sense than the journals do that she felt Native work directly inspired or guided her own spiritual search.

But then, what Carr understood of the spirituality of First Nations people was mostly what she got from looking at the poles and other carvings: “The power that I felt was not in the thing itself, but in some tremendous force behind it, that the

carver had believed in.”¹² That was as close as she could come. Although she occasionally wrote and talked about such things as the meanings of the totems,¹³ there is no evidence that she had any deep knowledge of Native spiritual matters.¹⁴ That kind of knowledge never belonged to her, any more than knowledge of African masks belonged to Picasso and other twentieth-century artists who quoted from those masks so freely in their work. Clearly, her own exploration of the spiritual in art took a very different route.

In any case, she was starting by the decade’s end to move away from Native subjects and she needed to look elsewhere, and since she had been painting landscapes as well as Native subjects earlier in the twenties, it made sense to turn toward the forest. By the spring of 1931 the switch was complete.

Working in the woods or at their edges, she had come to the idea that the divine expressed itself as growth. She wrote on a 1930 painting trip to northern Vancouver Island that the trees “are never idle they are growing & expanding developing with the universe. God is among them he has breathed into them the breath of life.”¹⁵ Even when she saw the forests brutally logged, her “resolute belief in the power of nature” allowed her, as Andrew Hunter has pointed out, to believe that forests could grow back as fast as they were being destroyed.¹⁶ Growth became an absolute principle and she spoke of it more and more, and of a Christian-sounding singular divinity manifested as growth. And art itself is growth: “one’s art is growth inside one.”¹⁷



Much later, Carr recalled that in making the switch away from Native subjects, writing helped. “It was not handling of paint but handling of thoughts which overwhelmed me. Trying to get around this problem, I took always in my sketch-sack a little note book.”¹⁸ In front of her subject, words untangled the thoughts and gave them focus. But paradoxically, she was discovering an approach to the divine that was beyond words. It was through the silent speech of *things*. Things are the universe’s language and God’s wordless messengers. So, we read in a 1932 journal entry of the “unspoken unwritten talk” of the trees.¹⁹ It is an echo of Walt Whitman, whose collection *Leaves of Grass* was central to Carr’s thought.* In her journals she quotes his poem “A Song of the Rolling Earth” three times, each time when contemplating the spiritual.²⁰ This poem declares that “the real words” are not from people’s mouths: the real words are air, water, fire, human bodies, the presence and gestures of human beings. The earth speaks the real words.

* Carr wrote near the end of her life that Whitman and Lawren Harris “helped fire me” toward the thrill to be found in work: (letter to Ira Dilworth, November-December 1944). Ann Davis pointed out that in fact all five of the artists pursuing art and the spiritual whom she studied in her book *The Logic of Ecstasy* – Carr, Harris, Fred Varley, Bertram Brooker, and Jock Macdonald – were devoted to Whitman (see her chapter “Whitman and Transcendentalism,” 42–94).



Fig. 3.2

Emily Carr, *Solitary Tree*, ca. 1931–33.
Charcoal on wove paper, 45.6 × 30.1 cm.
Purchased 1946. National Gallery of
Canada, Ottawa, accession number 4641.
Photo: NGC.

The earth does not withhold, it is generous enough,
The truths of the earth continually wait, they are not so conceal'd either,
They are calm, subtle, untransmissible by print,
They are imbued through all things conveying themselves willingly,
Conveying a sentiment and invitation, I utter and utter,
I speak not, yet if you hear me not of what avail am I to you?
To bear, to better, lacking these of what avail am I? ...
To her children the words of the eloquent dumb great mother
 never fail,
The true words do not fail, for motion does not fail and reflection does
 not fail,
Also the day and night do not fail, and the voyage we pursue does not fail.

Repeating part of this poem in her journal in late 1932, Carr writes “I utter & utter I speak not, yet if you hear me not of what avail am I to you?” and then, “half of painting is listening for the ‘Eloquent dumb Great Mother’ (nature) to speak the other half is having clear enough consciousness to see God in all.”²¹

With Whitman at her side, Carr explored this wordless speech of nature. “The woods were in quiet mood ... every time I have been in them today, Whitman’s ‘Still Midnight’ ‘This is thine hour oh Soul, thy free flight into the wordless’ sang in my heart.”²²

And as she followed her own path into the wordless she lost patience with Theosophy. “I do see the big grandness of much in it,” she wrote in 1933. “It’s their attitude towards the Bible I can’t endorse.”²³ As distant as she had grown from the “small & mean & unjust” Christianity of her family and especially of her strict older sister Lizzie,²⁴ she had remained loyal to the Christian Bible. In 1930, speaking of forests, she remarked that “like the bible you can find everything in them that you look for,”²⁵ and her reading in the early thirties also included contemporary Christian books.²⁶ But now her habit of going to lectures in Victoria – on religion, psychology, meditation, “Courage”²⁷ – pushed her further toward what her biographer Paula Blanchard described so well as “the personal, comforting elements of Christianity she needed to keep.”²⁸

In early 1934 she heard a lecture by A.I. Raja Singham, an “educated & vital”²⁹ Sri Lankan who was touring Canada and the United States as a representative of the Christian Mission of India. Raja Singham spoke of Gandhi, of India, and above all, of Jesus. Carr asked him to supper and went to more lectures, eight in all; and on 25 January she wrote, “Today he has been in my studio from 10:30 to ¼ to 2. He is splendid fearless earnest & grand. We talked of many things. everything in him centres on ‘Christ’ ... No sect no creed no bonds but just God & Christ.”³⁰ Raja Singham strengthened her resolve to find her own spirituality and he attracted her for exactly that reason, just at the moment she was shifting away from the “Philosophers.”³¹ (And since he was a missionary she could invite her missionary-loving sisters Alice and Lizzie, her closest companions, to hear him – a rare possibility for shared thought.) Telling Lawren Harris and her other Theosophist friends in Toronto of this shift, she felt she cut herself off from them, even though, as Blanchard observes, her approach, with its openness and its emphasis on individualistic practice, was, if explicitly Christian, not really so different from Theosophy’s.³²

Raja Singham “stirred me to the foundation.”³³ But other spiritual leaders would come along, most importantly Clem Davies, who conducted mass services in a Victoria theatre and also had a radio ministry, and whose services became for Carr “my unorthodox church” for some years after 1934.³⁴ “They were not very conventional services but happy, uplifting services.”³⁵

This happy aspect of his ministry was part of the warmth she craved in religion, and it went along with her pursuit of the wordless, which to her was a joyful thing.



Fig. 3.3
A.I. Raja Singham. Photograph, *Winnipeg Tribune*, 29 September 1934. Image courtesy of *Winnipeg Tribune*.

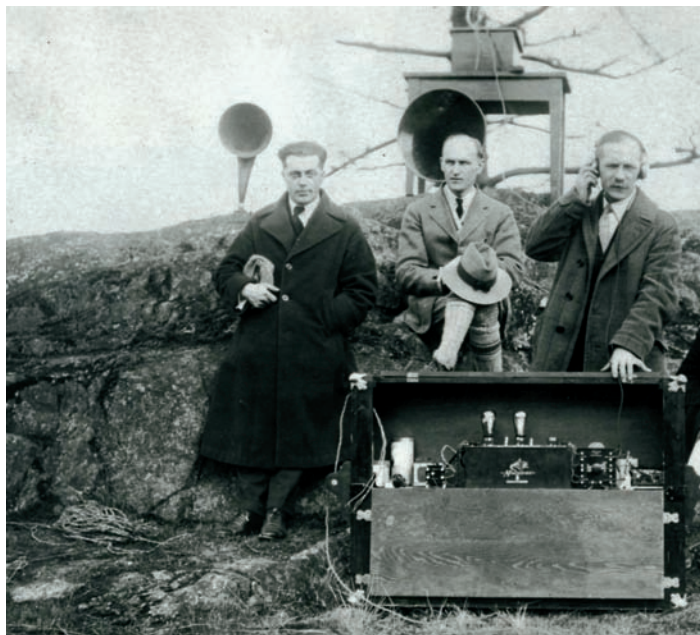


Fig. 3.4

Clem Davies, on the left, on top of Mt Tolmie, Victoria, BC, where he held Easter services, using loudspeakers to reach his massive audience. On the right is local broadcaster George Deaville. 19 April 1927. Photographer unknown. Photo courtesy of Mr Ken Stofer, Mount Tolmie.

For Easter 1935, “Clem Davies had dawn service at Mount Tolmie, illuminated cross, piano accordion music, special streetcars & busses, and the whole paraphernalia of movie pictures I suppose to break the solemnity, shoving their cameras through the crowd during prayers” (Emily Carr’s journal, 21 April 1935).

Davies, according to a 1951 obituary, broadcast more than fifteen thousand “radio sermons and messages” during his lifetime and was credited with “establishing the first standard broadcasting station in western Canada,” at Victoria (“Dr. Clem Davies,” *Toledo Blade*, 22 December 1951).

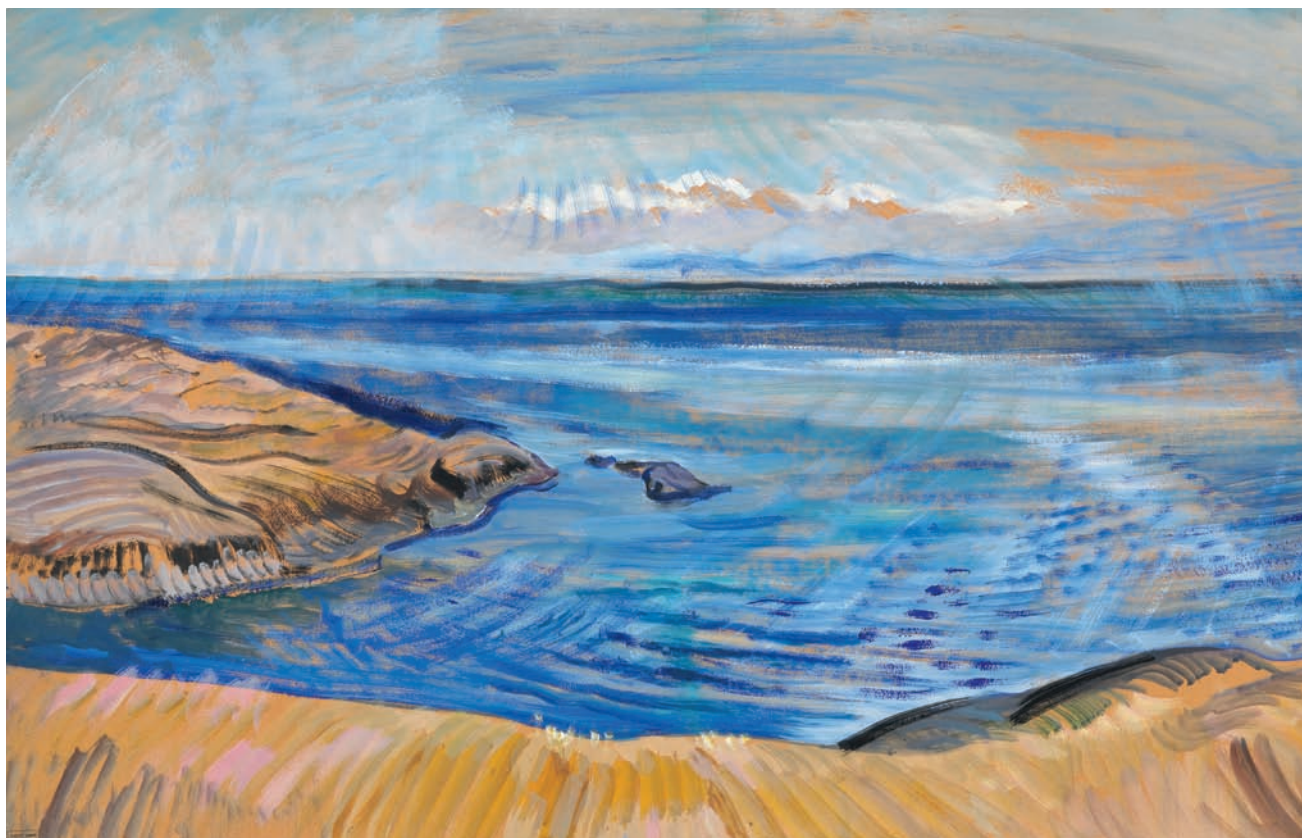


Fig. 3.5

Emily Carr, *Seascape*, ca. 1935. Oil on wove paper, mounted on masonite, 56.5 × 87.4 cm. Purchased 1947. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, accession number 4832. Photo: NGC.

“The movement & direction of lines & planes shall express some attributes of God. Power, Peace, strength serenity, joy.”³⁶

God, Whitman, movement – a synthesis that drives her great paintings of the years after 1932, the forest scenes and then the seascapes that she painted from a hilltop near her house. Joy gives these paintings a new kind of energy. A younger British Columbia artist who knew her, Jack Shadbolt, explained it beautifully in his own later years:

There is a kind of automatic transcendental joy that comes from having gone through a thing totally in a consuming way, where all your sort of private agonies and anguishes are absorbed, and you come out the other side. And she went through her sort of Valhalla period, her Wagnerian grandeur period in the forests. And I think all that identity was cleared from her by then, and finally emerged into this state of sort of supreme joy ... And it has nothing to do with the fact that you’re merely accepted or anything. That’s on the surface ... it’s a release ... It comes out in this enormous sense of joy in the work process itself ... Just anything, just the swirl of light, the movement of sun over the grasses. The feeling of growth, being alive, the blue sky rolling over. These were enough in themselves to create the ecstasy that was just part of the process.³⁷

And more recently, the painter and writer Lewis De Soto remarked that her late paintings “have an ecstatic rapture to them that is almost unrivalled in art.”³⁸

By early 1936, she had come to an even greater depth and breadth of thought, in fact to a state that Ann Davis describes as that of an advanced mystic.³⁹ Now Carr wrote that “the arrangement, the design colour shape depth light, space, mood, movement, balance, not one or all of these fills the bill. There is something additional, a breath that draws your breath into its breathing a heartbeat that pounds on yours, a recognition of the oneness of all things.”⁴⁰ Not that she felt she had reached her goal. The quest for the absolute – that ultimate romantic quest – was infinite. It could not end, and at some point she realized she didn’t want it to end. As the philosopher and intellectual historian Isaiah Berlin said, the inexhaustible and the unembraceable are precisely what the romantics give a work of art depth.⁴¹ “There will always be a beyond,” she wrote. “It would be terrible to catch up – the end of everything. Oh God let me never catch up till I die – let me be always feeling up & out, beyond & beyond into eternity.”⁴²

The main thing about Carr’s spiritual path was not the return to Christianity, which in any case was not exactly a return although she called it that. Even after leaving Theosophy behind she spoke of reincarnation⁴³ and summarized in her journals a passage from Annie Besant’s *Karma*.⁴⁴ And the wordless speech of things offered as much truth as the Bible. In a late letter to her friend and editor Ira Dilworth



Fig. 3.6

Emily Carr Reading a Letter from Eric Brown, Director of the National Gallery, 1930. Photograph: Nan Cheney. Item BC1849/080, Nan Cheney Papers, University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections.

she wrote, “Ira do you believe in the second coming of Christ in person to rule on this earth? The Bible states it definitely but I somehow can’t count on it as a fact.”⁴⁵

No, the salient point about Carr’s spiritual life is that she continually invented it. She felt entirely free to “wander between and around” all kinds of spirituality, as Charles Taylor put it,⁴⁶ and to piece together what worked for her and her art.

EMILY CARR AND THE WORDLESS SPEECH OF THINGS: ARTISTS’ WRITINGS

The writings here are in four sections.

First, there are excerpts from the journal of Emily Carr’s life-changing 1927 trip to Eastern Canada.

These are followed by part of her 1930 address to a Victoria audience. While the excerpts I have included are about the spiritual in art, the address is more broadly a plea for “Creative Art,” with a history for it that she pieced together out of Early Christian art, the “old masters,” Cézanne, and, in Canada, the Group of Seven. At the same time Carr presents the West as a place whose artists must give it its own

voice, just as Native art (spoken of in the past tense) did, “in spirit very modern, full of liveliness and vitality.” The second, Canadian, half of the talk shows a nationalism that is an aspect of the public Carr, so different from the private one; in the journals that nationalism shows up only in a very few comments written during the 1927 trip (she wanted to be “one woman holding up my end” in “building an art worthy of our great country”)⁴⁷ and then ten years later, when she says that by dodging publicity throughout her career “I have been forgetting Canada and forgetting ‘women painters’ It’s them I ought to be upholding.”⁴⁸ You will find toward the end of these excerpts a paragraph in which she speaks of the artist and viewer beginning to “feel space” in a picture; there, her own experience begins to come out.

In the third section below, excerpts on art and the spiritual from Carr’s journals of 1930–34 are interwoven with excerpts from Lawren Harris’s letters in order to give some sense of the importance of their long conversation, which was at its most intense in these years. Carr’s letters to Harris no longer exist. According to her friend Edythe Hembroff-Schleicher, Harris honoured her wish not to allow them to survive him, and Carr likewise destroyed the most personal of his before her death.⁴⁹ However, she did keep fifty-seven of Harris’s letters, and it is a sign of what they meant to her that she incorporated whole chunks of them into the autobiography that she wrote near the end of her life and dedicated to him.⁵⁰ Even though Carr was famously short-tempered and prickly – “damn I’m always like that bursting forth making enemies instead of friends”⁵¹ – Harris never failed to see her best qualities and her potential. Most important, the letters had “always the insistent kindly push – work, work, always the cheering of my despair and discouragements,”⁵² and according to Carr, this succeeded when other people’s comments mostly failed. Harris’s biographer James King suggests that the exchange with Carr was deeply important to Harris too, for there was no other correspondent to whom he revealed as much of his personal feelings about his art.⁵³

Carr’s own thinking was becoming increasingly independent, and this was the period when she began to speak more of growth as the divine principle and the first principle of art. It was a phase of her long effort to connect herself to God and the natural world – a struggle that had engaged romantic artists and writers from the early nineteenth century onward. Both Carr and Harris speak of the inexhaustibility of the artistic search, an aspect of the romantic they shared.

I have also included a little of the journal from Carr’s third and final visit to Toronto in November 1933. That was the last time she would enjoy the friendship of Harris and of Bess and Fred Housser without the complications caused by her rejection of Theosophy and by her upset over the collapses the following year of the Harris and Housser marriages, and Lawren Harris and Bess Housser’s subsequent marriage. These entries show the great value Carr placed on their intellectual and spiritual companionship.

In the final section, in journal excerpts from 1935 to 1937, Carr continues to speak of going to nature without preconceived ideas just as Cézanne and Monet did, but with a much greater focus on movement. As in previous years, she writes of painting in terms that bring to mind what one might call meditation, and it was now taking her to a great breadth, beyond movement or any other single aspect. There is a confidence and depth in the writing that reflects the distance she had come since that first trip to Toronto. The final entry here, from April 1937, is a beautiful thought on the never-ending spiritual longing that drove her painting.

Emily Carr, from the journals written during and after her 1927 trip to Ontario*

Toronto, 17 November 1927, after visiting the studios of Group of Seven members

Oh, God, what have I seen? Where have I been? something has spoken to the very soul of me, wonderful, mighty not of this world. Chords way down in my being have been touched ... Something has called out of somewhere, something in me is trying to answer. It is surging through my whole being the wonder of it all like a great river rushing on dark & turbulent & rushing and irresistible and carrying me away on its wild swirl like a helpless little bundle of wreckage. Where where? Oh these men this Group of 7. What have they created a world stripped of earthiness shorn of fretting details purged, purified. A naked soul pure & unashamed, holy spaces, filled with wonderful serenity. What language do they speak those silent awe filled spaces – I do not know wait and listen you shall hear by-and-bye. I long to hear and yet I'm half afraid. I think perhaps I shall find God here the God I've longed & hunted for & failed to find. Always he's seemed nearer out in the big spaces sometimes almost within reach but never quite. perhaps in this newer wider space filled vision I shall find him.

Toronto, 11 December 1927, after visiting Lawren Harris's studio again

I have never felt anything like the power of these canvases. They seem to have called to me from some other world sort of an answer to a great longing, for as I came thro' the mountains I longed to cast off my earthly body & float among the great pure spaces between the peaks and up the quiet green ravines in the high clean pure air. Mr Harris has painted those very spaces & my spirit seems able to leave my body & roam among them and they make me so happy.

* Emily Carr's journal for 10 November–25 December 1927 is in box 2, folder 14, Emily Carr Papers. An edited version of Carr's journals was published in 1966 under the title *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of Emily Carr*. The excerpts in this chapter are quoted from the unedited handwritten originals, now reproduced, as are all of Carr's journals, on the Heritage Canadiana website. Her punctuation, abbreviations, underlinings, and other distinctive aspects of her writing have been retained.

Toronto, 13 December 1927

I wonder if he realizes how I appreciate his generosity & what the day meant to me in trying to solve the riddles & mysteries that I've plugged along alone with for so long. This I am convinced of, he has come up to where he now is by diligent intelligent grinding & wrestling & digging things out, that he couldn't do what he is doing now without doing what he has already done that his religion whatever it is I don't know & his painting are one & the same.

Journal entry written on the train trip back to British Columbia

The mountains are more beautiful for having seen Mr. Harris's pictures. It has helped me to see them in a bigger way realize space better. How I do want to learn more about space.

Journal entry on returning to Victoria, 25 December 1927

all the oddments of jobs & the cleaning up of things indoors & out that have accumulated in my absence have taken every minute & left me woefully tired. When will I start to work? Lawren Harris's pictures are still in my brain. They have got there to stay. I don't believe anything will oust them I hope not because they make my thoughts & life better. The memory of them is a wonderful joy. They are the biggest strongest note of my whole trip East. It is as if a door had opened into unknown tranquil spaces. I don't tell anyone about them because they would not understand. I spoke about them to Mr Varley. He does not feel about them as I do. He thinks he is going too far bringing religion in too much. for his own part he says he likes to stick a bit firmer to good old Earth. Maybe! but somehow to me there is more reality in a Lawren Harris than any of the others. I seem to know & feel what he has to say. To me it is a clearer language than the others are using. Why? I wonder – I have never studied Theosophy & such things, & I don't think I want to, but there's something that gets at me & if it is theosophy that gives that something I'd like to know about it. It could be nothing bad that inspired those pictures.

Emily Carr, from a talk given in Victoria, 1930*

Great art of all ages remains stable because the feelings it awakens are independent of time and space. The Old Masters did the very things that the serious moderns of today are struggling for, namely, trying to grasp the spirit of the thing itself rather than its surface appearance, the reality, the "I Am" of the thing, the

* Emily Carr, from "I Hate Like Poison to Talk," an address to the Victoria Women's Canadian Club on 4 March 1930. This excerpt is taken from the typescript original in box 7, folder 31, Emily Carr Papers. The talk was published after her death in *An Address by Emily Carr*, and again in *Fresh Seeing: Two Addresses*.

thing that means “you,” whether you are in your Sunday best or your workday worst, or the bulk, weight and impenetrability of the mountain, no matter if its sides are bare or covered with pine, the bigger actuality of the thing, the part that is the same no matter what the conditions of light or seasons are upon it – the form, force and volume of the thing, not the surface impression. It is hard to get at, this. You must dig way down into your subject, and into yourself. And in your struggle to accomplish it, the usual aspect of the thing may have to be cast aside. This leads to distortion, which is often confused with caricature, but which is really the emotional struggle of the artist to express intensely what he feels. This very exaggeration or distortion raises the thing out of the ordinary seeing into a more spiritual sphere, the spirit dominating over the subject matter. From distortion we take another step on to abstraction, where the forms of representation are forgotten and created forms expressing emotions in space rather than objects take their place, where form is so simplified and abstracted that the material side, or objects, are forgotten, only the spiritual remains.

This use of distortion accounts for the living qualities in many of the Old Masters. The dear, queer old saints with hands and faces and bodies all distorted, but with their spirits shining through, with such a feeling of intense beauty. It was not that these men could not draw. Do you think that their things would have lived all through the centuries, if there was nothing more to them than bad drawing? It was the striving for the spiritual above the material. Had they made the bodies ordinary the eye would have been satisfied with the material side. It would have looked no further and would soon have tired. But, being raised up above the material, the spiritual has endured and will for all ages. The early Christian artists, seeking to perceive an aspect of man suitable for a divine image, thought away the flesh and distorted the human body to make it as uncorporeal as possible.

As the ear can be trained by listening to good music – so the eye can be trained by seeing good pictures.

People complain that modern art is ugly. That depends on what they are looking for and what their standard of beauty is. In descriptive or romantic art they are looking for a story or a memory that is brought back to them. It is not the beauty of the picture in itself that they observe. What they want is the re-living of some scene or the re-visiting of some place – a memory.

The beauty concealed in modern art consists more in the building up of a structural, unified, beautiful whole – an enveloped idea – a spiritual unity – a forgetting of the individual objects in the building up of the whole.

By the right disposition of lines and spaces the eye may be led hither and thither through the picture, so that our eyes and our consciousness rest comfortably within it and are satisfied. Also, by the use of the third dimension, that is, by retrogression and projection, or, to be plainer, by the going back and the coming

forward in the picture – by the creation of volume – we do not remain on the flat surface having only height and breadth but are enabled to move backward and forward within the picture. Then we begin to feel space. We begin to feel that our objects are set in space, that they are surrounded by air. We may see before us a dense forest but we feel the breathing space among the trees. We know that, dense as they may appear, there is air among them, that they can move a little and breathe. It is not like a brick wall, dead, with no space for light and air between the bricks. It is full of moving light playing over the different planes of the interlocked branches. There are great sweeping directions of line. Its feeling, its colour, its depth, its smell, its sounds and silences are bound together into one great thing and its unfathomable centre is its soul. That is what we are trying to get at – to express; that is the thing that matters, the very essence of it.

There are different kinds of vision. The three most common are:– practical, curious and imaginative. Because these are habitual in daily life, we have become accustomed to use them when looking at pictures and all three of them cause their owner to be interested in practical matters, in the data which the picture records, in matters of skill, in story-telling, etc. If anyone using only these three types of vision looks at a picture in which the trees have, let us say, been made universal instead of particular (that is to say, in which they have had all their pictorial, meaningless branches and wiggles omitted and the essential shape then changed to meet the needs of design), he is more or less incensed, his practical vision at once asks, what are they? When told they are trees, he is angry and says, “They don’t look like it.” The fact that the artist has aimed at another goal than that of copying is beyond his comprehension. It doesn’t exist for a person using only these three types of vision.

The attainment of further adventure in seeing pictures depends on what is called pure vision. This is the vision that sees objects as ends in themselves, disconnecting them from all practical and human associations. In that direction only lie the new horizons which have been revealed for us by the modern movement.

Emily Carr, from the 1930–1934 journals, with letters from Lawren S. Harris*

After their second meeting in April 1930 in Toronto, Harris began addressing his letters to “T’Other Emily,” Carr’s own name for her “inner self”⁵⁴ and a sign of their shared devotion to art as a spiritual path.

* Carr’s journals for these dates are in box 2, folders 15–22, Emily Carr Papers. Harris’s letters are in box 2, folders 2–6 of the same collection.

Lawren Harris to Emily Carr, March 1930

If you have not seen a copy of the Canadian Forum for March, get one and read about your work in the comments on art* – and then send it on to the Victoria newspaper for their attention. The lady who wrote it is a very real person and knows her way all around and about modern art. She's the best person of all three sexes writing on art in Canada to-day – extraordinarily energetic and completely fearless and entirely honest. She has been here just a year and thinks Canadian art a genuine contribution – but read the article [...]

I am going to preach a bit: the true artist is outside of social recognition. He puts himself (or herself) outside because he couldn't work otherwise. His or her point of view (attitude) is the opposite to the society attitude. Society lives by rule, creed, what is and what isn't done. The artist lives from within, not from without. He has no code. He has an attitude. Art begins where imitation ends and where morality ends and where all bunk ends – hence the deep innate separation of the artist from all goose-steppers whether in Religion, medicine, society, state or what you will. When Jesus said to the crowd that would stone the prostitute let him who is without sin cast the first stone he made as pure an aesthetic statement as exists. It was just in the right sense, perfect proportion.

Harris to Carr, [June 1930]

Dear T'Other Emily,

Now that's too bad – that you are in despair – well, lets be as philosophic as we can. Despair is periodic, a part and parcel of the life of every creative individual – some even succumb to it and are swamped for this life. It cannot be conquered – one rises out of it [...]

That which creates in man is a god – and we have to become that god, which is actually ourselves. All the rest is personal – action and reaction, dipped in joy, dipped in despair, slang-whanged around by a cosmos of moods, desires, feelings.

It's no use to tell you that your work does not warrant despair. Every creative individual despairs and always has since the beginning of time no matter how fine the things they produce. There are always finer things to be done and still finer, ad infinitum –

Take a clean new canvas and start something all over again – fresh. And if that doesn't work take another clean new canvas and commence again, putting the entire past behind you.

We have to be intense about what we are doing – but think what intensity does, what it draws into itself, concentrates and then do you wonder that if

* Jehanne Bietry Salinger, "Comment on Art," *Canadian Forum* 10, no. 114 (March 1930): 209–11. Salinger was the first art critic to write for the *Canadian Forum* in the thirties. Of French origin, Salinger had arrived in 1929 from San Francisco, where she had an art page in the *San Francisco Examiner* and an art magazine of her own, the *Argus*.

things don't go as well as we anticipated that the reaction from intensity is despair. Make a fresh start – but keep on working, even if you should take a short holiday from it.

Carr, journal entry made on a trip to northern Vancouver Island,
24 August 1930

What do these forests make you feel? Their weight & density their crowded orderliness. There is scarcely room for another tree & yet there is space around each. They are profoundly solemn yet upliftingly joyous. Like the bible you can find everything in them that you look for showing how absolutely full of truth are both how full of reality – the juice & essence of life are in them. They teem with life growth expansion they are a haven of refuge for myriads of living things. As the breezes blow among them they quiver yet how still they can stand yet they are never idle they are growing & expanding developing with the universe. God is among them. He has breathed into them the breath of life.

Carr, journal entry, Victoria, 23 November 1930

Yesterday I went to town, & after I had been to the market & bought wallflowers & cauliflowers & bread & horrible meat which I always wonder why I eat and I go on eating, then I went to the 15 ct store & bought this book to enter scraps in not a diary of statistics dates & decency of spellings & happenings, but just to jot 'me' down in – un-varnished me – old me at 58 old, old, old in most ways & in others just a baby with so much to learn & not much time left here but maybe somewhere else. This place can't be the end of learning I know it isn't now. Maybe I thought it was once. Seems to me it helps to write things & thoughts down seems to me it makes the unworthy ones look more shamefaced & helps to place the better ones for shure in our minds. It sorts up jumbled thoughts & helps to clarify them & I want my thoughts clear and straight for my work.

Carr writes later in this long entry:

I have copied a bit from Lawrence's book 'St Mawr'* on the typewriter about a pine tree. It's clever but it's not my sentiments nor my idea of pines, not our north ones anyhow. I wish I could express what I feel about ours, but so far it's only a feel. I have not put them into words. I'll try later because it's that trying to find equivalents for things in words to help me find equivalents in paint is the reason of this journal. Everything is all connected up, different paths leading to the great 'It' the thing we try to get at by hook & by crook.

* D.H. Lawrence, *St Mawr* (Toronto: A.A. Knopf, 1925).

Harris to Carr, Toronto, 26 December 1930

Dear T'Other Emily,

In your last letter everything you say describes the attitude of the true artist in so far as I know it. There is no realization, only moments toward realization – the beckoning of all-satisfying completion, fulfilment. Something indeed that we cannot attain individually, separately, but only as the complete spiritual solidarity [of] mankind. But strive we must. All art is but intimation, all genuine friendship a sign, all nobility a hint of fulfilment. In so far as I can guess at the attitude of those who are beyond me their experience is like mine, save that wisdom informs them, and they are not perturbed at their seeming failures – they are detached from the results of their effort even though these are an indissoluble part of themselves.

The artist in so far as he or she is artist lives by inner compulsion – the mass of people by outer compulsion, hence, they are somewhat indifferent to what results from inner compulsion – and how can it be otherwise. While there is for us no ultimate satisfaction as individuals there is a certain satisfaction in facing and accepting the fact [...]

Please don't pin yourself down to not writing for three months or even three days. If you feel like uncorking at any time do so. In one part of me (my soul) I'm touched when I can be of use even though it may be a negative use at the time. Anyway let us be as free as can be to write when we want to and not to write if we feel that way.

I'm painting some of the [Arctic] things – not bad – but nothing to usher the soul into eternal bliss. I am striving but also not realizing and aware most moments that I'll come to the usual disillusionment of accomplishing anything unusual. I'm trying to get up to the summit of my soul and work from there – there where the universe sings.

Bless you and your work always,
Lawren H.

Carr, journal entry, Victoria, 11 January 1931

It did me good to have to rattle round & work to get ready for [the Seattle show],* & the fact that it fell flat was good for my conceit. if the work was big enough – hit the bulls eye – people would have to acknowledge it. it missed but oh how can we get 'it' the great universal language that everyone understands, the thing down deep that we all feel. Oh the lazy minds & shrinking hearts of us that shirk the digging grind – our blind old eyes that don't see & our souls that lie flat on the earth too dead to soar up – up into the place that Lawren H. calls "Where all the universe sings."

* A solo show at the Art Institute of Seattle, 20 November 1930–4 January 1931.

Carr, journal entry, 18 January 1931

I have done a charcoal sketch today young pines at the foot of a forest. I may make a canvas out of it. It should lead from joy back to mystery. Young pines full of light & joyousness against a background of moving mysterious forest. Last night I dreamed – it was piffling but L.H. moved in it, and also I came face to face with a picture I had done & forgotten a forest, done in simple movement, just forms of trees moving in space. That is the third time I have seen pictures in my dreams. a glint of what I am striving to attain perhaps some day I shall get things clearer.

Carr, journal entry written at the southern tip of Vancouver Island, 20 January 1931

I have been to the woods. Esquimalt. Day was splendid – sunshine & blue blue sky, & two arbutus with tender satin bark smooth and lovely as naked maidens, silhouetted against the rough pine woods. Very joyous & uplifting but surface representation does not satisfy me now. I want not “the accidentals of individual surface but the universals of basic forms, the factor that governs the relationship of part to part – of part to whole, and of the whole object to the universal environment of which it forms part.”*

Carr, 28 January 1931 journal entry

I am on a big totem, heavy woods behind – Gosh how I want that nameless thing. 1st there must be an idea feeling or whatever you want to call it but the something that interested or inspired you sufficiently to desire to express it – maybe it was an abstract idea that you’ve got to find a symbol for – or maybe it was a concrete form that you have to simplify or distort to meet your ends but that starting point must pervade the whole. Then you must discover the pervading direction the pervading rhythm the dominant, recurring forms the dominant color but always always the thing must be top in your thoughts everything must lead up to that clothe it feed it balance it tenderly hold it till it reveals itself in all the beauty of its idea.

Carr, 17 June 1931 journal entry

Always I am always asking myself the question what is it you are struggling for? what is that vital thing the woods contain, possess, that you want. why do you go back and back to the woods – unsatisfied longing to express something that is there & not able to just find it. this I know I shall not find it until it comes out of my inner self, until the God quality in me is in tune with the God in it. only by

* Loosely quoted from “Twelve Principles of Art Criticism,” the introduction to Horace Shipp’s book *The New Art: A Study of the Principles of Non-Representational Art and Their Application in the Work of Lawrence Atkinson* (London: Cecil Palmer, 1922).

right living and a right attitude towards my fellow man, only by intense striving to get in touch in tune with the Infinite shall I find that deep thing, hidden there until my vision is clear enough to see until I have learned, & fully realize my relationship to the Infinite.

Harris to Carr, Toronto, 20 December 1931

Dear T'Other Emily,

You say "Your best work is done before it even got the chance to be good" – that is precisely the feeling of every artist worth bothering about. With you it is not that it is not actually true but having started a somewhat new direction in your tree subjects, you, nor any else, can hardly expect that you will achieve a complete fullness of expression immediately [...]

You're just beginning a deeper search into the fundamental life in trees and forest and nature in her deepest, most secret moods and meanings and to expect to perfect in terms of paint a complete equivalent for your deeper approach short of years of on-going hard slugging is to ask too much [...]

Now, again and again – no one in Canada or anywhere else is doing what you are doing. That is, your contribution is unique and will remain so, I feel. For goodness sake, do keep on despite any temporary discouragement or anything else. Age has nothing to do with it – though maturity of idea and conviction has – and you have both.*

Carr, journal entry, Victoria, 3 November 1932

This is the first of the three occasions when Carr loosely quotes Whitman's "Song of the Rolling Earth" in her journals to back up a thought about art and the spiritual.

Why don't I have a try at the rocks & cliffs & sea? Wouldn't it be good to rest the woods? Am I one ideaed small narrow? God is in them all – now I know that is all that matters the only thing worth striving for – To express God every living thing is God made manifest. All real art is the Eternal seeking to express God, the search for the reality of each object that is its real and only beauty to recognize our relationship with all life. The one substance – God – out of which all things are made to say: to every animate & inanimate thing 'brother' to be at one with all things, finding the divine in all. When one can do this maybe then one can paint. In the meantime go steady with open mind, courageously alert waiting always for a lead. Constantly watching constantly praying meditating much. not worrying. W.W. says:

* Carr wrote to her friend Nan Cheney on 7 February 1932, "Lawren Harris feels I am going deeper & haven't quite hit it yet. & its a case of dig. & I think he's right" (*Dear Nan*, 13).

“Sing on Singers. Say on Sayers.
 Delve, mould pile the words of the Earth
 Work on age after age nothing is to be lost
 It may have to wait long but it will shurely come in use
 When the materials are all prepared & ready
 The Architects will shurely appear.”
 I swear to you the architects shall shurely appear
 I swear they will understand you & justify you
 He that is greatest among them is he who [illegible] best understand you
 and encloses all & is faithful to all
 He & the rest shall know that you are not one iota less than they.
 You shall be fully glorified in them”

So – no matter if we are not to make the goal ourselves all our work aids helps to accumulate material for the great final structure. Our business is to do our own small part with absolutely no thought of personal aggrandizement or glory.

Emily Carr, 12 November 1932 journal entry

Here Carr begins to bring in Whitman's idea of the wordless speech of things.

To go out there into the glory of the woods. To see God in every particle of them. Expressing Glory and strength & power & tenderness & protection. To know that they are God expressing God made manifest. To feel their protecting spread. Their uplifting rise their solid immovable strength. To regard the warm red earth beneath them nurtured by their myriads of fallen needles, softly fallen slowly disintegrating through long processes always living changing expanding round & round. A continuous process of life eternally changing yet eternally the same. To see God in it all, to enter into the life of the trees to know your relationship to understand their language unspoken unwritten talk. To answer back to them with their own dumb magnificence. Soul words. Earth words. The God in you responding to the God in them. Let the spoken words remain unspoken but the secret internal yearnings wonderings seekings findings in them is the communion the myriad voices of God expressed. Shouting in one great voice of the God “I Am one God in all the universes there is no other but ‘Me.’ I fill all space I am all time. I am Heaven. I am Earth. I am All in All.”

Listen this perhaps is the way to find that thing I long for. Go into the woods alone look at the earth crowded with growth. New and old bursting from their strong roots hidden in the silent live ground, each seed according to its own kind expanding bursting pushing its way upward towards the light and air each one knowing what to do each one demanding its own rights on the earth. feel this growth the surging upward this expansion, the pulsing life, all working with the

same idea the same urge – to express the God in themselves. life life life, which is God for without Him there is no life.

Harris to Carr, 2 December 1932

Well, I don't suppose you do know precisely what you are after. I don't think in the creative process any one quite knows. They have a vague idea, a beckoning, an inkling of some truth and it is only in the process that it comes to any clarity. Sometimes, indeed often, we work on a theme, with an unformed idea and when it has passed through the process its final result is something we could never have predicted when we commenced. Of course there must be the urge, the indefinable longing to get something through into terms of plastic presentation but results are nearly always unpredictable.

"The still place" O, don't we all want that – it is within us, deep – we have to feel back to it – it is the well-spring of beauty – art, the creative process is one way toward it – but it is beyond process, beyond laws, rules, religions, desires – all by itself, alone, complete in fulfilment.

Carr, journal entry, Victoria, 27 January 1933

In working from sketches – the sketch should convey the idea lacking maybe in detail but the essence of the idea. The thing that decided you to attempt that particular subject should be shown more or less. Take that small sketch home & play with it on paper with cheap materials that you may not feel hampered but dabble away gaily extravagantly play with your idea keep it fluid toss it hither & thither but always let the idea be there in the core. after a certainty has been arrived at in your mind leave the sketch alone forget it & put your whole thought to developing the idea.

To empty oneself, to come to the day's work free – open – with no preconceived ideas no set rule of action. Open & willing to be led receptive & obedient calm & still, unhurried and unworried over the outcome, only sincere & alert for promptings.

Harris to Carr, [early 1933]

Well no, I am not sure "if the spiritual meaning had shown clear it would have spoken for itself." The real thing is only recognizable by that which is real in people – and the reality in people is overlaid with a million different things – having to do with conventions mostly and protection and self satisfaction and little silly games the person plays to hide life from itself. No, if the real thing were recognizable when it occurs, or rather, if it were recognized, all the bother of creative individuals throughout the ages in breaking down conventional, accepted and comfortable barriers would not have been necessary. I mean that every individual who makes any kind of a contribution has had either to wait until folks get accustomed to it or to force it on them by publicity. Funny, but true, most families have

a reputation for some one or other of their members but don't give a hoot for the work that achieved it. To understand art in its reality requires disinterestedness – it is not personal at all – and that for most folks is just not quite possible.

Carr, journal entry, Seaton Lake, in the British Columbia interior,
[3 June 1933]

I am groping horribly lost, trying to search for that thing. It is right here and yet I do not know how to find it. It is in me and yet so far away I cannot reach it. I don't know where to look and I want it so badly I'm sick – yet I'm dumb and bound – if I only knew what binds me so I could tear it off – if my eyes were only not blind so I could see – and my numb senses so quiveringly alert & sensitive that I could feel in every fibre of me the ecstasy of comprehension – Oh you old fool. Come down. Clean out your heart & mind & soul. Fast & pray – the body the material predominates so – I am a slave to the flesh – the spirit strangles and grasps – it cannot soar because it is weighted down by fleshy things. Good food, comfort, laziness, bodily ailments – cannot the Spirit dominate the liver? throw out the depression? rise above the inertia? I am a slacker. What is it Ziegler said? * “Do not try to force those great forests, woo them.” Is it I must seek first the true spirit of humble worship, the spirit of communion with the infinite, the allness of God in the universe. Perhaps it is this one must seek to find in others. I feel things clearer when I am away from humans in the woods – God seems there more – why? To be shure one is there among his silent things but not among his highest tip-top creations – Man – one should feel him more when amongst those creations made in his image & likeness – why is it we don't? Man has answered God back, been saucy and irreverent. dumb nature has obeyed, goes ahead according to the seasons – lives silently – in the mystery of things and gives everlasting praise to the eternal.

Carr, journal entry, Victoria, 16 July 1933

Once I heard it stated and now I believe it to be true that there is no true Art without religion. The Artist himself may not think he is religious but if he is sincere, his sincerity in itself is religion. If something other than the material did not speak to him and if he did not have faith in that something, and also in himself he would not try to express it. Every artist I meet these days seems to me leaks out the fact that somewhere – inside him – he is groping religiously, for something. Some in one way some in another, tiptoeing stretching up, longing for something beyond what he sees or can reach.

I wonder will death be much lonelier than life. Life's an awfully lonesome affair. You can live close against other people yet your lives never touch. You come into the world alone & you go out of the world alone.

* Gerhard Ziegler, a German architect who had visited Carr while travelling in North America.

Yet seems to me you are more alone while living than ever going & coming. Your mother loves you like the deuce while you are coming. Wrapt up there under her heart is perhaps the cosiest time in existence then she & you are one – companions – At death again hearts loosen & realities peep out but all the intervening years of living something shuts you up in a ‘yourself shell.’ You can’t break thro or get out nobody else can break thro & get in. If there was an instrument strong enough to break the ‘self shells’ and let out the spirit, it would be grand.

Carr, 17 July 1933 journal entry

I don’t follow all the theosophy formula but the substance is the same as my less complicated beliefs – God in all. Always looking for the face of God – always listening for the voice of God in nature – Nature is God revealing himself, expressing his wonders and his love. Nature clothed in God’s beauty of holiness.

Carr, 30 July 1933 journal entry

Whitman knew life from the soul’s standpoint. What glorious excursions he made into the unknown – he wrote, “Darest thou now O soul Walk out with me to this far region where neither ground is for the feet nor any path to follow”? and he dared.

Carr, journal entry, Goldstream Park (20 kilometres north of Victoria), in her recently purchased camping trailer, 7 September 1933

the 4 dogs burst like fireworks out of the van door at 6:30. at seven I followed & we took our dewy walk in the woods then some washing dried on the campfire which made my undies look & smell like smoked fish, & I got to work with my things for the first time all comfortable placed about everything to hand. I made a small sketch then worked a large paper sketch from it, & towards evening another small one. the woods were in quiet mood, dreamy & sweet, no great contrasts of light & dark but full of quiet glowing light & fresh from the recent rain, and the growth full, steady and ascending every time I have been in them today, Whitman’s ‘Still Midnight’ “This is thine hour oh Soul, Thy free flight into the wordless” sang in my heart.* I’ve a notion, imagination perhaps – that if you let your sight roam a little so that you are slightly off focus you vision the spiritual a little clearer. Perhaps it is that one is striving for something a bit beyond their reach an illusive something, that can scarcely bear human handling & that the ‘material we’ scarcely dare touch. It is too bright & vague to look straight at, the brutality of a direct look drives it away – half imagined half seen. Something that lies, as Whitman says, in that far off inaccessible region where neither ground is for the feet nor path to follow – & he asks his soul if she dares step out with him

* Walt Whitman, from “A Clear Midnight,” *Leaves of Grass*.

to seek it.* I do not say to myself I will do thus or so. I leave myself open to leads doing just what I see to do at the moment neither planning or knowing but quietly waiting for God & my Soul.

Harris to Carr, 12 September 1933

It's a queer world in its manifestations, inexplicable in its manifestations, but behind the manifestations the One Law is at work ceaselessly, inexorably, supremely beautifully. Viewing only the manifestations infinite, unexpected and curious – there seems to be chance in everything – yet there is no chance, no accident, down to and including the death of a mosquito. The One Law, its glory, and also the wake of horrors from its infringement is, I am coming to see, the very basis of art and life and the entire universe.

Carr, 16 September 1933 journal entry

Emily Carr I wonder at you – this morning I got a letter from Lawren Harris he says – “Got a swell tirade from you against the attitude of my last letter.” What cheek for a nobody like me to criticize a somebody like him. I did not think his attitude toward a certain thing right & up & told him so. He is jolly nice to take it like that. A little man would have got mad, & called me a busybody old fool, & not thanked me & blessed me & said it did him good [...]

I am painting a flat landscape low lying hills with an expanding sky. What am I after – crush & exaltation? It is not a landscape & not a sky, but something outside & beyond the enclosed forms. I grasp for a thing & place one cannot see with these eyes but only very very faintly with ones higher eyes.

I begin to see that everything is perfectly balanced that what one borrows they must pay back in some form or other. That everything has its own place but is interdependent on the rest that a picture like life must also have perfect balance – every part of it also is dependent on the whole & the whole is dependent on every part. It is a swinging rhythm of thought swaying back & forth leading up to – suggesting – waiting urging the unworded statement to come forth & proclaim itself voicing the notes from its very soul. To be caught up & echoed by other souls – filling space and at the same time leaving space – shouting but silent. Oh to be still enough to hear & see & know the glory of the Sky & Earth & Sea.

Carr, 9 October 1933 journal entry

Direction that's what I am after everything moving together relation movement sympathetic movement. Connected movement, flowing, liquid, universal movement. All directions summing up in one grand direction leading the eye forward – and satisfying.

So to control direction of movement that the whole structure sways vibrates rocks together. not wobbling like a bowl of jelly.

* Whitman, “Darest Thou Now, O Soul,” *Leaves of Grass*.

Carr, 14 October 1933 journal entry

I think we miss our goal very often because we only regard parts forgetting the leads up to our objective overlooking the ensemble painting the trees & forgetting the forest – not one part can be forgotten – a main movement must run through the picture the transition must be easy not jerky. None must be out of step in the march. On on deeper & deeper into the soul of the thing burrowing into its depths & intensity. Till that thing is a reality to us & speaks one grand inaudible word. – God – the movement & direction of lines & planes shall express some attributes of God. Power, Peace, Strength serenity, joy. the movement shall be so great the picture will rock & sway together carrying the artist & after him the looker with it. Catching up with the soul of the thing & marching on together.

Carr, journal entry, Chicago, 4 November 1933

It doesn't matter about the pictures really.* What I am looking for I must work out for myself. it is between God and me. Laziness made me desire to look at the pictures of others to try & pick up short cuts – recipes that others have used to get what they desired to express, instead of going straight to the thing itself, to stand before it meek and silent, feeling deeper & deeper & more intensely till its life throbs vibrate through you. Till the inaudible words of the earth (God's words) speak to you & tell you what to do.

Carr, journal entry, on her third and final visit to Toronto, 17 November 1933

One week & 2 days every minute splendid have passed, too full of living to write – long talks with Fred and Bess, wanderings in those far-off regions where neither ground is for the feet nor path to follow. Long talks with Lawren in his studio, unashamed talks from the naked soul. A searching for the realities & the meanings. The beautiful pictures all round gleaming calm inscrutable notes & glimpses of the between places where the soul penetrates & the body does not. Where sex colour creed race does not enter.

Carr, journal entry, on her way home from Toronto, 18 November 1933

Last Sunday evening Lawren Harris lectured in the Theosophy Hall on war.[†] It was a splendid lecture but terrible, one of those dreadful things that we want to shirk not face. He spoke fearlessly about the churches and their smugness, & of mothers offering their sons as sacrifices and the hideous propaganda of politics & commerce exploiting war with greed & money for their Gods, & we stupidly

* Carr had travelled to Chicago to see *A Century of Progress: Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture, June 1 to November 1, 1933*, a show of more than a thousand works at the Chicago World's Fair, and it had closed just before she arrived.

[†] A talk published as "Theosophy and the Modern World: War and Europe" in the *Canadian Theosophist* 14, no. 9 (15 November 1933): 281–8 (discussed in the first chapter).

indolently sitting blindfold. Swallowing the dope ladled out to us instead of thinking for ourselves. His lecture was mainly based on two recent books, “No Time Like the Present” by Storm Jameson and another I forget the title of. The preparations for war are fearful beyond belief. It took some courage to get up & tell the people all that awfulness.

Carr, journal entry, Victoria, 28 November 1933

What hind before topsy turvy beings we are. Always trying to unwind the ball from the wrong end & getting in horrible snarls. Starting to write from the tail end back & to paint the outside of our pictures before constructing the skeleton inside. Have you ever rubbed your cheek against a man’s rough tweed sleeve and from its very stout warm texture against your soft young cheek felt the strength & manliness of all it contained? Afterwards you discovered it was only the masculine of him calling to the feminine of you. No particular strength or fineness & you ached a little at the disillusion & said to yourself, sleeves are sleeves, cheeks are cheeks & hearts are blood pumps.

Carr, journal entry, Victoria, 1 December 1933

A heaviness descended upon me this afternoon. Why? A great black foreboding cloud. Are those I love worried or in trouble? I cried far into the night. Why? how should I know just a great wanting – a longing to know & understand. Which way?

I have looked at the catalogue of the pictures in Chicago that I did not see. what is the test of a picture? not form or color or design or technique – it is intensity of experience & feeling the existence of the thing spiritually. If the Spirit does not speak nothing has been said even tho the surface forms clamor & clank. If the small still voice of reality cannot be heard above the hubbub of objective seeing the picture is a blank nothing. Oh to realize that intensity – it is of the Soul – Oh God give it to me – It is mine already deep within but asleep. How can I wake it? oh HOW?

Harris to Carr, Toronto, 4 December 1933

Dear Emily,

Don’t get discouraged about your work. Dig in, and proceed, approach the laying in and painting in a different way than you have before. I don’t mean a change in attitude but a change in the actual approach of laying in, and on the paint. You should have years of good solid work ahead of you – and here is to it.

Of course, no one can avoid getting into the dumps occasionally, and it is a necessary part of the whole process of art and life and everything else. But to start new things is, I think, the way to take advantage of the doldrums.

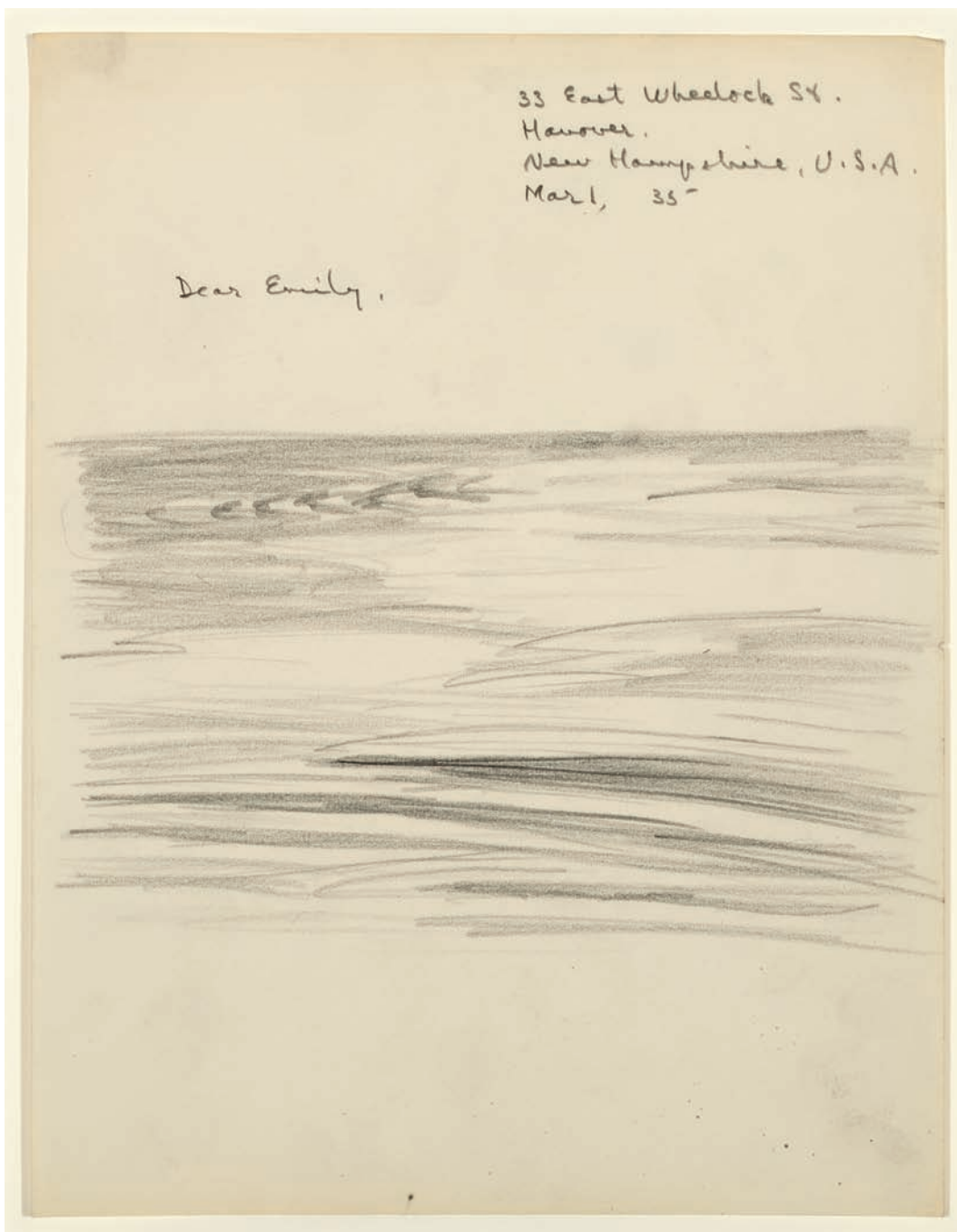


Fig. 3.7

Lawren S. Harris, "Dear Emily." "Letter" to Emily Carr, 1 March 1935. Graphite on paper, 27.8 × 21.54 cm.
The Robert McLaughlin Gallery. Gift of Margaret H. Knox, 1984. Image courtesy of Robert McLaughlin Gallery.

If your visit here did you good, it also did us good. Such things are mutual, praise God. In any real relationship one alone does not benefit but both, and everyone.

Carr, 11 December 1933 journal entry

A letter from Lawren – he is a real person. How worth while friendship is when it is that unashamed kind that can talk straight of soul things & the deep things of one's work that really matter not just the froth of life – the fillups & surface. We have a compact between us that each will not deny his own Divinity – I mean slate yourself & your work. I used to horribly instead of recognizing & calling forth the Divine in oneself. Oh I must lay aside all these little details of life that occupy me so much – clear the decks for action, keep my ideal straight & high and think over the head of digging & dogs & dishpans good in their places, but make them sit under the higher things not occupying the prominent place in life.

Carr, 28 December 1933 journal entry

Oh you half thoughts that come tantalizing and eluding. Why do you tease so? Why not come & stay? This hide & seek business tires one. Do you say, "If we showed ourselves too plainly the game would be over you would cease to seek?" Perhaps. It's the same always – people – places – pictures – reading. The same thing. I suppose Lawren would call it 'Law.' When you are dimmest & not really looking you see clearest. You can't put the 'dimmer' on yourself. It is just there at times. When it's there your memory works in a different way, for instance in reading you won't remember a single word, but inside you remember the meaning or a glimpse of it. You couldn't put it into words or explain it to someone else. In painting you don't see the woods or whatever you are looking at but something else, bigger & more vital. In people you do not see nor can you afterwards recall their features, their face does not exist. What you know & love is way in back, in their soul [...]

The spirit and its vehicle, or manifested body must work together through each other for perfect realization. What were the good of a carriage with no 'go.' What the good of the 'go' with no carriage to sit in. The body must not be ignored and the soul must not be ignored – a third thing must be born of the two. I cannot name the thing and all the books can't and I do not think it needs a name. A word would spoil it would be too crude for such an elusive – Spirit? being? thing? Even a thought is too hard & material to press upon it tho sometimes it travels in thought yet when you go to pick it out of the thought, separate it – clothe it in definitions it has gone – lifting up beyond – just out of your reach and left you empty.

Carr, journal entry, Victoria, 29 January 1934

I have said goodbye to the Raja. He is splendid. I heard him 8 times & I am so glad he came here I can't tell how glad my outlook has all changed [...]

Oh this is live vital religion the theosophy God & Philosophers are beautiful but cold & remote & mysterious. You circle round & round & rise up a little way so that your feet are loose, but there is beyond & beyond & beyond that you never could reach. God is absolute law & justice. but here a live Christ leads you to God and the majestic awefulness is less awful. Tonight he interpreted the life of Mahatma Gandhi brought out all his nobility & greatness & spoke so lovingly & understandingly of his weakness as if he was talking of his own father that he loved [...]

What does spirituality in painting mean? 1st the seeing beyond the form to the spiritual reality underlying it – its meaning. 2nd the determination power and courage to stick to the ideal at all costs. But there is a danger of letting the ideal become diluted with vagueness, uncertainty, indecision. then the thing is lost and left unsaid [...]

He has phoned to say goodbye, and to give me his blessing. He has left a book at the Y.M.C.A. for me to read. He has made me feel India is just across the street, almost within shouting distance and well within the praying radius. Tomorrow he goes to Seattle and then into southern states and eastern Canada and New England, and possibly, home via Victoria in 18 months' time. Bless him and his work always. And now I look round to see what effect all this will have on my work. Will it make it more vital? Or will it — — — finish it. Or — — — I leave it to God & watch to be told. This has stirred me to the foundation. I am exhausted today for I have been wrenched this way & that, lifted thrown down, rejoicing despairing. Oh when this ferment wears off, will I find Peace and surrender, finally. Or will I be rooted and stand firm, and end this 50-years chase, go back to my starting point for I believed and loved God then tho' I was a bit scared of him too ...

I have written to Lawren & told him about things. I think he will be very disappointed in me & feel I have retrograded way way back fallen to earth level, dormant & stodgy as a sitting hen. I think he will hardly understand my attitude for I have been trying these 3 years to see a way thro' Theosophy. He Fred Bess have all tried to help me & wanted me to get it & become one of them. Now I turn my back on it all and go back 60 years to where I started, but it is good to feel a real God, not the distant mechanical theosophical one.

Carr, 16 February 1934 journal entry

I have had a long fine letter from Lawren. How could I ever have doubted his friendship and thought that when I told him about having gone back to Christianity our ways would more or less part. he is glad I have found inner light &

blesse me harder than ever. I am so glad. I want to struggle ahead like thunder now & after all the 'struggle' is 'being still' not slack but still and alert for any leads that may come through. And like poor Mary ponder them in the heart. I like the Virgin Mary she was not a blabber.

Emily Carr, 6 March 1934 journal entry

It's a help to sing to your picture while you work – Sing that canticle 'O all ye works of the Lord Bless ye the Lord. Praise Him & magnify Him forever.' I am trying to get that joyous worshipping into the woods & mountains the 'works of the Lord.' Gee I'm glad I have a lonesome studio with no one to hear but the dogs & Susie* – and God.

Carr, 4 April 1934 journal entry

I woke this morning with "Unity of Movement" in a picture – strong in my mind. I believe Van Gogh had that idea. I did not realize he had striven for that till quite recently, so I did not come by the idea through him. Seems to me that clears up a lot. I see it very strongly out on the beach & cliffs now. I felt it in the woods but did not quite realize what I was feeling. Now it seems to me the first thing to seize on in your layout is the direction of your main movement. the sweep of the whole thing as a unit, being very careful about the transition of one curve of direction into the next. Vary the length of the wave of space but keep it going a pathway for the eye & the mind to travel through & into the thought. For long I have been trying to get these movements of the parts. Now I see there is only one movement – it sways and ripples it may be slow or fast but it is only one movement, sweeping out into space but always keeping going, rocks sea sky one continuous movement.

Carr, 6 April 1934 journal entry

Just came from last lecture on Art by Miss Auld* ... Who of us know just why we do what we do much less another's whys or what we're after? – Art is not like that cut & dried & hit at like a bull's eye, and done for a reason & explained away by this or that motive – It's a climbing and a striving for something always beyond not a bundle of 'rules' or a bunch of 'feels' nor a taking of this man's ideas & tacking them on to that man's ideas and making a mongrel idea & calling it 'My Own.' It's a seeing dimly, beyond, and with eyes straight ahead in a beeline marching right up to the dim thing. you'll never quite catch up there will always be a beyond. It would be terrible to catch up – the end of everything. Oh God let me never catch up till I die – let me be always feeling up & out, beyond & beyond into eternity.

* The pet rat.

† Jean M. Auld (1885–1979), who taught art history and classics at the University of British Columbia and also taught at the Vancouver School of Art.

Carr, 24 April 1934 journal entry

It seems as if those shimmering seas can scarcely bear a hand's touch. That which moves across the water is not scarcely a happening hardly even as solid a thing as a thought, for you can follow a thought. It's more like a breath involuntary & alive, coming going always there but impossible to hang onto. Oh gee whiz! I want to get that thing. It can't be done with hands of flesh & pigments. Only spirit can touch this.

Carr, 3 May 1934 journal entry

Movement is the essence of being. When a thing stands still and says 'finished' then it dies. There isn't such a thing as completion in this world for that would mean Stop! Painting is a striving to express life. If there is no movement in the painting, then it is dead paint. If the striving for & the longing for completion were satisfied that would mean stagnation. A picture by a satisfied artist hangs lifeless on the wall but if the artist is fuelled with longing & striving to get on further – see beyond – keep moving, there will be a carrying on. Also for the beholder who himself will feel the need of pressing on further to something bigger – Longing is greater than satisfaction.

Carr, journal entry, 23 June 1934

(Dream) the sky and the earth are one the light pours down is lapped up by the great sea & absorbed by the receptive earth. All runs through all the same to express the oneness & the allness. Moving living being together. To surround everything with atmosphere to show the direction of its thought and growth, to show that thing coming & going breathing through the objects life, to become a part of it yourself & feel its life & growth as your own life & growth, & the sunshine & the light passing through you also and the lift and lilt of praise pouring through filtering and rising up again like a mist.

Carr, journal entry, 7 November 1934

After a real struggle I finished "something unnamed" the story of the crow. Its face will need a bit more washing but its insides are in order. Is there anything in [my stories]? I feel them deeply as I write. I wonder if Flora is right & my painting is waiting on my writing. How interesting it is to work on the two. They are alike & different. I want to write & write – longer spells than I want to paint – to climb round my problems & know my people. Writing is more human than painting.

From Emily Carr's later journals, 1935–1937*

31 May 1935

Sometimes the soul gets so lonely, it tries to break through its silence. The tongue & ear want to handle it to help it grow to fertilize it. Everything is for the soul's growth. She calls to all the physical & material to help her. This physical body is so short-lived and its sole use is to contribute to the growth of the soul. And yet we act as if its sole use was for itself for its comfort and ease.

When souls touch and commune either silently or by speech, it's the keenest joy there is, I suppose. In later lives perhaps we shall be sorted up not in 'physical' families but in 'soul' families. And we'll use soul talk, soul attributes, & put on soul growth [...]

The whole of life appears to be great longing & reaching out. The trees & the plants just are the product of the longings of the root down there in the quiet earth longing to get above ground into the freedom of the light and air. The creatures long to be close to humans, to do what the humans who are their Gods do, to go with them live with them. And we want to push on too, to know more & do more things & peer into the unknown, & get a glimpse of the mystery beyond. I suppose the desire is growth.

Albert Head (on the coast near Victoria), September 1935

Sketching in the big woods is wonderful. you go find a space wide enough to sit & clear enough so that the undergrowth is not drowning you, then being elderly you spread your camp stool & sit & look round. "Don't see much here" – "Wait." Out comes a cigarette. The mosquitoes back away from the smoke. Everything is 'green' – everything is waiting & still. Slowly things begin to move to slip into their places. groups masses & lines tie themselves together. colours you had not noticed come out timidly or boldly. in & out, in & out, your eye passes nothing is crowded, there is living space for all. Air moves between each leaf. Sunlight plays and dances. Nothing is still now life, life is sweeping through the spaces. everything is alive the air is alive. The silence is full of sound. The green is full of colour light & dark chase each other. Here is a picture – a complete thought – and there another and there – then everywhere. Something sublime something ridiculous or joyous or calm or mysterious – Tender youngness laughing at gnarled oldness. Moss & ferns & leaves & twigs light & air, depth & colour. Chattering, dancing a mad joy dance only apparently tied up in stillness & silence. It is you that must be still to hear and see it.

* Carr's journals for these dates are in box 3, folders 2–6, Emily Carr Papers.

16 November 1935

Oh there's the thought I had this morning! "The spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters," and God created the "breath of life" into them. That was the thing that made the whole difference. When we create a picture we too must use our God given power to breathe into it the breath of life. We can only do this by drawing it from God, letting God breathe through us into it. This is a wonderful thought. When the breath of life passes through a thing, it moves. Growth is always moving. A little thing becomes a big thing. We do not see it happen but it has happened. It is appalling this terrific push behind life.

12 December 1935

A piece was brought to me today from Saturday Night* (I think) A man who had been to my studio wrote it. I felt dreadfully embarrassed & blushed up when [my friend] read it out.

17 January 1936

Over and over one must ask oneself the question – What do I want to express? What is the thought behind the saying? What is my ideal? what my objective? What? Why? Why?? What?? The subject means little. The arrangement, the design colour shape depth light, space, mood, movement, balance, not one or all of these fills the bill. There is something additional, a breath that draws your breath into its breathing a heart beat that pounds on yours, a recognition of the oneness of all things. When one looks at their own hand, they are not conscious of feeling it (unless it hurts) yet it is all intimately connected up with us. Our life is passing through it. When we look at a piece of the universe we should feel the same. When you really think about your hand you begin to realize its connection, to sense the hum of your own being passing through it. So perhaps it is a gradual process of becoming conscious of the life of nature the hum of life in us both tuning in together. If the air is jam full of sounds which we can tune in with why should it not also be full of feels & smells, things seen through the Spirit, drawing particles from us to them & them to us like magnets? Creative expression then must be the mating of these common particles in them & in us. First there is a wooing on both sides a mutual joyous understanding a quiet growing, waiting, and then – Oh, I wonder if I will ever feel that burst of birth joy, that knowing that indescribable, joyous thing that has wooed & won me has passed through my life & produced one atom of the great reality.

* G. Campbell [Graham] McInnes, "World of Art," *Saturday Night*, 7 December 1935, on Carr's solo show in Toronto at the Women's Art Association – a remarkably perceptive review: "Painting to her is almost a religious experience, but there is no suggestion of a sentimental mysticism. Rather there is, in her work, despite its strength and dynamic movement, a joyous quality ... Miss Carr is a great artist."

October 1936

There's words enough paint & brushes enough and thoughts enough. The whole difficulty seems to be getting the thoughts clear enough, making them stand still long enough to be fitted with words & paint. They are so elusive like wild birds singing above your head twittering close beside you chortling in front of you but gone the moment you put out a hand.

25 November 1936

It is the supreme thing one wants. They want it so badly that you ache. The Spirit moving isn't that it? Movement alone is not enough "The spirit of God moved on the face of the waters" Spirit is undying life. Life is always progressing. The supreme in painting is to intimate that spiritual movement. The act of being. Perhaps if one understood music they could approach easier. Everything is in the act of becoming. Nothing has ever quite become.

19 April 1937

Seems to me a large part of painting is 'longing,' a fluid movement ahead, a pouring forward towards the unknown, not a prying into things beyond but a steady press towards the barriers an effort to be on hand when the barriers lift. A moving towards. A picture is just an 'on the way thing,' not caught & static, something frozen in its tracks but a joyous going. Lines of longing, sweeping towards – what? We don't know. Music is full of longing – movement – painting should be the same.

The Spanish Civil War and the Moral Duty of Artists

It is time now to see how the experience of the Spanish Civil War has had reverberations which have stirred Canadians to think of their own human condition.

Dorothy Livesay, 1976

In the year 1936, the great question of an artist's duty to society, a question debated throughout modern times, began to seem even more urgent than in earlier Depression years. The rise of fascism overshadowed even the year's 17 per cent Canadian unemployment rate, the continuing droughts on the Prairies, and the general disarray in which capitalism seemed to be stuck. Adolf Hitler was rearming Germany and his master race policies were becoming ominously clear, although the unspeakable consequences of those policies were not yet imagined. The Treaty of Versailles was dead. Italy had attacked Ethiopia without reprimand from the ineffectual League of Nations, and both Germany and Japan had left the League. But then, in summer 1936, fascist forces under Francisco Franco attacked Spain with the aim of overthrowing an already unstable leftist coalition government. Germany and Italy stepped to Franco's side, supplying weapons, planes, and men. The Soviet Union came to the aid of the Spanish Republican government, and some watchers, especially those on the left, saw the war as "a kind of Armageddon, a final confrontation between the forces of the right and forces of the left."¹ Many soon understood that another world war was inevitable.

It has long been known, especially through the work of Charles Hill and Esther Trépanier, how Canadian artists and intellectuals addressed, or chose not to address, the upheavals of the Depression decade.² But the Spanish Civil War was most decisively a time for position taking, and the fast-moving events that surrounded it should be a bigger part of the story. This chapter is an effort to understand how individual artists and critics saw their roles in the growing crisis.

First, it is important to keep in mind that those on the far left – including artists and writers – had been directed in 1935 to make a sweeping change. The Communist International in Moscow, alarmed by the growing fascist threat, had introduced the United Front concept, and communists were now supposed to court the despised "pink" leftists, such as members of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), Canada's new social democratic party, and to persuade these former enemies to become allies in the fight against fascism. It was quite a reversal. Would the moderate leftists opt in?

Absolutely not, replied the *Canadian Forum*, Toronto's social democratic magazine. Frank Underhill, the historian and prominent CCF activist, remarked in a *Forum* editorial that while a United Front of anti-fascist groups might be a good idea in principle, the Federation "is the only party on the left which has shown any capacity for becoming a mass movement," and it would lose that capacity by engaging with the communists, who "have always shown a congenital addiction to bitter sectarianism which amounts to genius and which cannot possibly be eradicated by any fresh orders from Moscow."³ In fact, Canadians so widely regarded communism as a foreign menace that, as another *Forum* editor said later, the CCF "lived with the knowledge that by simply turning up at one of our meetings, a Communist could cost us votes and members."⁴

The *Forum* did allow a wide range of ideas on art and the social into its pages. It even carried a purely communist article about the artist Sam Borenstein urging artists to depict the misery caused by capitalism and fascism,⁵ and it ran a more didactic piece explaining the Marxist concept that art is never detached from social and economic development, that "there is a continuous interplay between the economic foundation and the artistic superstructure." Quoting Marx's famous assertion that "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, it is their social existence which determines their consciousness,"⁶ the writer concluded that art must then be "an expression of the general, or social consciousness."⁷ But the *Forum's* overall perspective on art, and on all subjects, was only modestly left of centre. Although its many reproductions of Canadian drawings and other art may have favoured social and urban content in the late thirties – and Esther Trépanier has pointed out that this went along with the increasingly international perspectives of artists who were turning away from Group of Seven-style nationalism⁸ – there was nothing remotely revolutionary there. Visually and verbally, the *Forum* was social democracy in print.

So, the *New Frontier* came out in Toronto in April 1936.* The poet Dorothy Livesay, one of the *New Frontier's* founders and editors and an ardent communist at the time, explained that the magazine was intended by the party to rally middle-class intellectuals – teachers, social workers, writers, artists – to the campaign against war and fascism.⁹ The *New Frontier's* first issues had the beginnings of regular columns on the arts. The visual artists reproduced in the magazine, all Canadian, included those whose political sympathies ranged from pale pink to scarlet – an artistic United Front.[†] Sometimes, full-page stand-alone reproductions of their work were included, work that seems to reflect what literary historian Candida Rifkind calls a "leftist documentary impulse," intended to evoke sympathy for a

* These developments are summarized in my book chapter, "Modern Art, the Local, and the Global, c. 1930–50." Kirk Niergarth provides much useful detail about the nature and content of the *Canadian Forum* and *New Frontier* as well as a third important periodical, *Saturday Night*, in his book *The Dignity of Every Human Being*, especially on pages 44–68.

† Fritz Brandtner, Charles Comfort, Laurence Hyde, Louis Muhlstock, Ernst Neumann, Harry Mayerovitch, Nathan Petroff, and Ellen Simon were the most prominent of these artists.

politically mute working class.¹⁰ However, the real regulars at the magazine were the far-left artists, who contributed a rich element of political satire as well as other kinds of images. The artist-architect Harry Mayerovitch, never officially a communist but deeply committed to their anti-fascist project, was an associate editor of *New Frontier* for most of its run and a frequent contributor of graphic satire and other work. He had spent a year in Europe following his graduation from McGill University, and there he “met developing fascism head on. I met radical artists and began to sketch and felt the taste of Nazism and war coming ... How can you separate art from all this?”¹¹

Apart from the *New Frontier*, there were few outlets for art that directly addressed the political, and when such work was produced it was often ephemeral. Much has no doubt disappeared: Esther Trépanier, who knew the Montreal artist Marian Scott well and has studied her work deeply, has been unable to find even traces of most of the political work on paper that Scott mentioned having made in those years.¹² There may also have been political art that scholars don’t yet know because it was done outside of the major cities and in immigrant cultures that were neither anglophone nor francophone (as Candida Rifkind pointed out in regard to writing¹³). More generally, the film historian Scott Forsyth has declared that the entire cultural left of post–First World War Canada has been marginalized by scholars although it was richly active, especially in the thirties.¹⁴ So, *New Frontier* has particular importance to visual art for giving a sense of that activity.



One evening in the summer of 1936, just at the onset of the Spanish Civil War, Paraskeva Clark and her husband Philip were entertaining dinner guests, including the writer-editor-artist Bertram Brooker and his wife Aurilla. More guests arrived: Norman Bethune, the radical Montreal physician and activist, and his artist friends Fritz Brandtner of Montreal and Pegi Nicol of Toronto. Nicol wrote afterwards to Marian Scott that Bethune, proclaiming a communist future,

took Bert Brooker and a few other pink artists for a fearful ride. The sound of the battle hasn’t died yet. I suppose he told you about it. We went to Paraskevas and wrecked a very pretty party. Paraskeva was very annoyed that I did not somehow keep him here so we could get the whole town wakened up. Tell him that she phoned and was terribly disappointed that he had gone back. I feel the same. He told Rilla Brooker If you have any blood prepare to shed it now as in childbirth when she implored him in lieu of the Revolution Is there no other way. They were pretty mad and so everyone is pleased.¹⁵

Norman Bethune had an almost fanatic energy, and at a moment when many were talking about moral duty in a crisis, he acted. During his eight years in Montreal,



Fig. 4.1
Laurence Hyde, illustration for "Bombardment at Albacete," *New Frontier* 2, no. 1 (May 1937): 17. Image courtesy of Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.

This drawing evokes the terror at the fascist bombings of Spanish villages just as does Picasso's *Guernica*, made at the same time. Laurence Hyde is among the young artists celebrated by Graham McInnes in his "New Horizons in Canadian Art."



Fig. 4.2
Nathan Petroff, *Modern Times*, 1937. Watercolour over graphite on wove paper, 57.5 × 39.2 cm. Purchased 1939. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, accession no. 4314. Photo: NGC.

This young artist expresses the despair provoked by the Spanish Civil War. Fascist insurgents shelled Madrid at various points beginning in November 1936, and the newspaper headline at the bottom of the painting refers to that – and perhaps also to the hell of war.

This painting was purchased by the National Gallery from the 1937–38 Canadian Group of Painters exhibition. The gallery's director Eric Brown had heard from the artist's former teacher that he was "unquestionably a very talented artist, and is time after time surprising us with something new and original in idea. He tends toward Communism in his work, but is very quiet in his manner" (Peter Haworth, quoted by Alicia Boutillier in *A Vital Force*, 20). He went on to become, under the name Paul Petroff, an accomplished and well-known scenic designer and art director in the US, first in theatre and then in television, and also worked as a muralist, sculptor, and photographer.

when he was not practising medicine or agitating for an equitable health system, he wrote and painted and even exhibited his art publicly. At the point of crashing the Brookers' party he had just turned his apartment into a centre where disadvantaged children could make art under the guidance of Fritz Brandtner and Marian Scott. He had also arranged a large Montreal exhibition of Brandtner's work to benefit the Canadian League Against War and Fascism, and the documents following this narrative reveal how that show became a focus for discussion of whether propaganda deserved a place in Canadian art.

Bethune had visited the Soviet Union in 1935, and shortly after his Toronto visit he became a communist, not as a follower of its orthodoxies but as an admirer of the Soviet Union's earnest, imperfect attempts to provide decent medical care to all, and as a doctor exasperated at Canada's utter failure to make such attempts.¹⁶ Also, he recognized that the communists were the only ones fighting fascism. In October 1936, Bethune left Canada to support the Republican forces fighting the fascists in Spain, and there he deployed a mobile transfusion unit he had invented to treat wounded fighters on the battlefield. This was funded not by the government, which refused involvement, but by the Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, a humanitarian group led by communists and social democrats together; it included both the communist Paraskeva Clark and the social democrat Marian Scott.

As the war in Spain spread, the tone of the *New Frontier* became even more sombre, and the columns on the arts disappeared. The illustrations now included only work about Spain or about fascism and war, sometimes embedded in articles on the war. Both the *New Frontier* and the *Canadian Forum* carried articles deploring the failure of Great Britain, Canada, and other countries to support the Spanish Republic, a failure that damned the Spanish government. Both magazines accused these countries of supplying weapons to Franco indirectly. But the *New Frontier* spoke far more vehemently: its editors, like many writers and other intellectuals in the Western world, saw the Spanish Republic, as Mary Biggar Peck said in *Red Moon over Spain*, as a "last hope, a last opportunity to do something in the face of a world gone mad."¹⁷

By late 1936 Madrid itself was under attack. A December *Canadian Forum* editorial commented that "all the world's a stage, but in Europe they're putting out the lights, and it's getting too dark and confused to catch more than snatches of

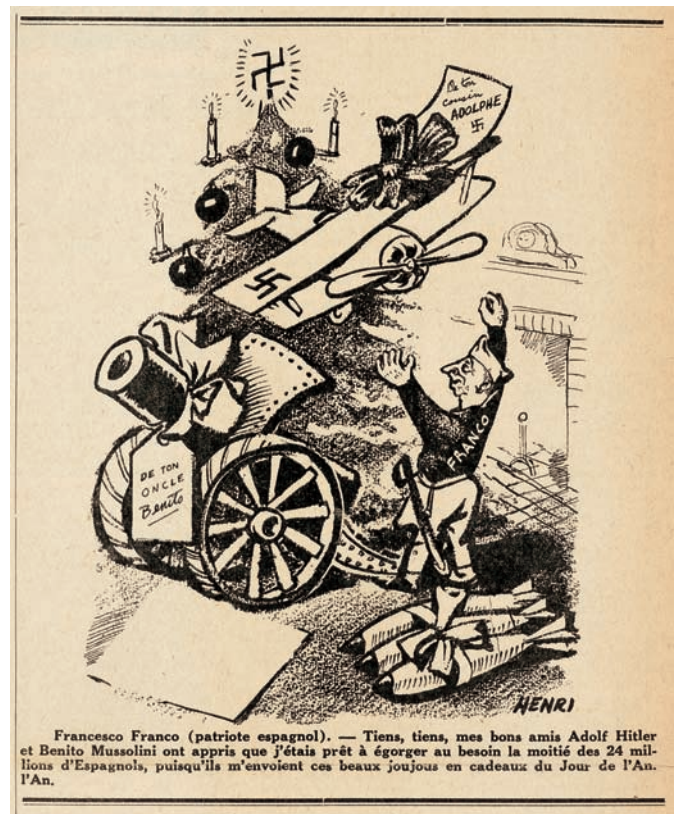


Fig. 4.3

Harry Mayerovitch, cartoon from *L'Autorité*, Montreal, 31 December 1936. Image courtesy of Bibliothèque et Archives Nationales du Québec.

The caption has Francisco Franco saying, "Well, well, my good friends Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini learned that I was ready to kill half of the 24 million people of Spain if necessary, so they sent me these lovely toys as New Year's Day gifts."

the colossal dialogue – The effect of incendiary bombs on large cities is now being experimentally tested on Madrid.”¹⁸ Most Canadians still considered this a battle between communism and fascism, but at this point the dread of another world war led some who had not yet taken sides to do so.¹⁹ “No one feels neutral about the issues which are being fought out there,” commented the writer Nicholas Ignatieff. “The only question is whether other countries, other human millions can be prevented from joining in mutual physical extermination.”²⁰

The *New Frontier* put out a special issue on the Spanish Civil War in December 1936. One of its features was “Where I Stand on Spain,” three and a half pages of statements by thirteen “prominent Canadians.”²¹ To the magazine’s credit, the authors of these statements represented a range of opinions, though of course none were pro-fascist. Two of them, the writer E.J. Pratt and the playwright and theatre director Herman Voaden, saw the Spanish government cause as already lost. Two writers who represented labour organizations still expressed hope for its victory. Margaret Gould, a social work professional and radical activist, thought the propertied classes would always suppress the workers no matter who won. The editor of Toronto’s *Saturday Night*, B.K. Sandwell, didn’t see much to admire in either side, but imagined it would be less distressing not to have Spain’s affairs settled by outside forces. William Arthur Deacon, a nationalistic literary editor (and a Theosophist), said Canada should stay clear altogether of a European death struggle, and should in fact cut ties with the British Empire. But most of these writers gave legitimacy to the Spanish government, as did Charles Comfort, the only visual artist of the thirteen, and several argued that the democratic countries should get involved. Comfort’s bold anti-fascist statement follows this narrative.



Just at that point, however, came a message urging artists to avoid politics entirely: the introduction to the 1936 *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada*, assembled, edited, and published by Bertram Brooker. In spite of the book’s supposed purpose of representing the state of the arts, Brooker’s introductory essay did not mention a single painter, sculptor, architect, photographer, poet, writer, or critic. Instead it was a very general series of meditations that describe the artist as one whose “sense of beauty makes him oblivious to the practical – the mundane. He is almost a foreigner in the world.”²² Artists, Brooker thought, should turn from politics toward the spiritual uplifting of a materialistic public. The essay was an expression of his long commitment to the romantic ideal of the artist as spiritual leader in the modern world,²³ an ideal shared by his friend Lawren Harris – who, unlike him, chose to face the global crisis directly. Brooker declared that “a rebellious, forward-looking spirit has been the artist’s birthright for ages,” and “today, quite naturally, therefore, a good many artists have swung violently to the Left. Many have openly embraced the Communist faith – or lack of faith – however you choose to look at it. And among fanatical Communists an artist who does not use his gifts to further

the cause of the revolution is stigmatized as a sort of traitor to his generation.”²⁴ But in Brooker’s view, real artists don’t further causes. They experience life profoundly, envision a better world, and express the universe’s ongoing movement toward perfection.²⁵

Brooker’s book and the art he chose to represent in it naturally did not do well among leftist critics. In fact, the debate that followed seems to have been the very centre of a conflict between the desire to create new connections between art and society (or rather, a kaleidoscope of desires, since many kinds of connections were dreamed of) and the romantic, spiritual address to nature and art that had been so important to English Canadian art.

In the *New Frontier*, the poet Leo Kennedy, one of the magazine’s editors, published a review contrasting Brooker’s essay with a new translation of a text by the Russian Marxist George Plekhanov that happened to have the same title, “Art and Society.” Dismissing Brooker’s idealist “nonsense,” Kennedy pointed out that much of the visual art and writing in the *Yearbook* was several years old and not representative “especially of the younger men whose work has latterly undergone a sharp development under pressure of economic failings and events.”²⁶ He accused Brooker of excluding in his escapism some of the most important socially minded artists and writers in Canada.

Another and no doubt more widely read critique of the *Yearbook* appeared in the mainstream newspaper *Saturday Night*, written by Barker Fairley, the scholar of German literature, defender of Canadian art, and recently a painter himself. Fairley complained that “the poetry feels up-to-date. And somehow the paintings and sculptures don’t. Browsing among these mostly contented landscapes and these nearly always realistic figures and portraits, one has little sense of the contemporary world, the world of Picasso and Henry Moore, torn by revolutions, and seeking after fundamentals.”²⁷ Frank Underhill of the *Forum* also stepped in and more or less damned Brooker’s entire book in a long review. Underhill found that unlike its 1929 predecessor, this *Yearbook* failed to capture the spirit of its time, which meant that all the work in the book except some of the poetry ignored the “world-shaking events” that were taking place. He dismissed Brooker’s introduction as mystical, somewhat incomprehensible, and supportive of escapism. Interestingly, although Underhill was a prominent social democrat, his remarks here sound very like Leo Kennedy’s. Underhill’s *Forum* editorials had begun to proclaim that Canadians needed to understand Europe better so that they could act independently of England and stay out of the coming world war. So, it is odd that he chose to write a review favouring engagement, at least artistic engagement. Besides, Underhill had only ever published one other piece on art.²⁸ Perhaps the historian Carl Berger explains it best in calling Underhill an iconoclastic spirit who was at his best as a negative critic.²⁹

Of those three reviews, Underhill’s was the one that Elizabeth Wyn Wood, past president of the Sculptor’s Society of Canada and the most important Canadian

sculptor of her generation, chose to attack in her well-known “Art and the Pre-Cambrian Shield,” published in the *Canadian Forum* two months later. Easily as powerful and persuasive a writer as Underhill, she makes a case for the romantic idealism that was the legacy of the Group of Seven to English Canadian art, in spite of the fact that her own sculpture at this time sometimes took a social turn in representations of rural and other workers. “What should we do instead?” she wrote, “Paint castles in Spain – crumbling?” – linking the cause of the Spanish Republic to the expression “to build castles in Spain” – to daydream.* She denounced all of Marxist thought in one key sentence: “Politics and economics do not make the fundamental structure of life.”

Wyn Wood’s attack on Marxism and on the whole idea of artistic engagement provoked a polemic from the far left by Paraskeva Clark.[†] In the equally well-known “Come Out From Behind the Pre-Cambrian Shield,” published in the April 1937 *New Frontier*, Paraskeva Clark proclaimed that the Canadian artist’s solitude in nature was being bought at a terrible price, and artists cannot forget they are human beings living in the world: “It is better to work out the destiny of your human nature, than to expect a divine one.” Paraskeva Clark attacked the way her friend Elizabeth Wyn Wood distanced the artist from world affairs; for Clark, the artist has no finer or higher purpose than to engage with them. What is at stake is the very exercise of individuality. “Everything is propaganda,” Clark said later, “and she was spitting on that. As if it’s not artistic, it’s not artist’s business.”³⁰ Clark’s line of argument connecting the Spanish war with Canadian life is straight from United Front ideology, like Dorothy Livesay’s poem “Spain,” published in the *New Frontier* two months later.

It is very important to note though that at several points in this polemic, Clark makes it clear that she is not advocating overt propaganda, but rather art that reflects contemporary human life. In fact she attacks Elizabeth Wyn Wood precisely for stereotyping leftist art as a set of communist symbols, and leaving out this broad way of thinking about what to paint.

Meanwhile, as events and ideas swirled around him, the young critic Graham McInnes was honing his own position. McInnes knew his Clive Bell and Roger Fry, and the phrases “significant form” and “aesthetic emotion” had turned up, for instance, in his review of his first David Milne show, seen earlier in this book. McInnes believed the best modern art – to him, always representational – showed sensitivity to one’s environment while obeying formal laws (the prevailing position among modern North American artists and critics of the era).³¹ But in this

* Northrop Frye’s remarks are relevant here and to the entire art-and-society debate: “It seems as though Romanticism finds it difficult to absorb the social perspective.” Instead romanticism emphasizes “a kind of creative and healing alienation to be gained from a solitary contact with the order of nature outside society” (*A Study of English Romanticism*, 38 and 47).

[†] According to Elizabeth Wyn Wood’s daughter Quennefer Browne, Wyn Wood’s polemic also provoked Clark to include a caricature of her mother in her most famous work, the anti-capitalist painting *Petroushka*, also from 1937 (Wolfe, “Engaging the Public Sphere,” 39).

Fig. 4.4

Dorothy Livesay, "Spain," as reproduced in *New Frontier* 2, no. 2 (June 1937): 16.

As a founder and editor of *New Frontier* magazine and an active communist, Livesay was responsible for spreading the United Front concept as widely as possible among English Canadian writers, artists, dramatists, and other intellectuals. Like Paraskeva Clark's and Charles Comfort's pieces in *New Frontier*, Livesay's poem tries to show readers why the war is their concern. It is itself a brilliant example of engaged art.

Another such poem by the Montreal poet A.M. Klein appeared in the *Canadian Forum* the following June. Possibly a response to Elizabeth Wyn Wood's article (it came from a three-poem sequence entitled "Of Castles in Spain"), it was dedicated to a friend, Samuel Abramson, who had gone to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Klein wrote, "As in the street-fight you maintain the law / And I in an armchair – weigh and measure Marx" (Klein, "Of Castles in Spain," 79). The literary historian James Doyle agrees with Dorothy Livesay's assertion that the Spanish Civil War provoked Canadian poets toward social concerns more than anything they witnessed in their own country in the thirties. (Doyle, *Progressive Heritage*, 145).

Livesay's poem is written in iambic pentameter. The use of traditional forms was common in *New Frontier* poetry, and it is useful to remember Candida Rifkind's point that modernism is increasingly seen as residing not only in formal experiment. Traditional forms could also offer the "mediation of conditions of modernity" when the content was radical (Rifkind, *Comrades and Critics*, 90).

Spain

When the bare branch responds to leaf and light,
Remember them! It is for this they fight.
It is for hills uncoiling and the green thrust
Of spring, that they lie choked with battle dust.

You who hold beauty at your finger tips
Hold it, because the splintering gunshot rips
Between your comrades' eyes: hold it, across
Their bodies' barricade of blood and loss.

You who live quietly in sunlit space
Reading the Herald after morning grace,
Can count peace dear, when it has driven
Your sons to struggle for this grim, new heaven.

DOROTHY LIVESAY.

turbulent time the formal side began to matter less. While he remained convinced that content must never overwhelm aesthetics, he began to speak of an uncompromisingly modern art that could still be deeply engaged in the social and the political. As the world situation and the era's rhetoric grew more and more urgent, he commented that "while an appreciation of form is of primary importance in evaluating a work of art, it is not the be all and the end all that it was popularly supposed to be ten years ago."³²

He found support for this shift in *Representation and Form*, a book just published in mid-1936 by Walter Abell, professor of art at Acadia University in Nova Scotia.³³ The book argued that Clive Bell was wrong: representation *does* have aesthetic value when it enriches form, although it must remain subordinate. As the excerpts below show, Abell's method was to "begin by reducing visual experience to its simplest elements – individual colours – and then progressively to trace its development into higher and more complex states," observing at each level "what aesthetic effects are there possible, what the relation of these effects is to form and to representation." In this way he concluded that artists need the richness of experience that the visible world provides. Not only is representation desirable but "without it even the highest *formal* effects are impossible."³⁴ Abell is quick to admit that not all subject matter has aesthetic value – he had no wish to return to academic

art – but from his perspective, all great art fuses subject matter and form into “representational form.” To McInnes, this analysis seemed to offer a wider, surer critical approach, and it abolished the “quite fictitious antagonism between subject matter and form” that had grown up since Bell.^{*35}

So McInnes added an element of Abell to his developing perspective, and in a January 1937 review of the work of Carl Schaefer, a young artist he especially admired, he saw “truths about his environment that have never before been stated so simply, so convincingly, and with such a genuine devotion to the strict requirements of combined plastic and representational form.”³⁶ McInnes became optimistic that Canadian art could go beyond romantic landscape to reflect people’s lives vividly. This was not a revolutionary thought, but it matched United Front politics as expressed by Paraskeva Clark’s article and others in the *New Frontier*. Carl Schaefer was enthusiastic too over the new possibilities. “The current shows around town are probably the best we have had for some time,” he wrote in April 1937. “The Water Colour Society, Graphic Art, paintings of Emily Carr, which are pretty good. A very interesting show of drawing of Louis Muhlstock, Montreal at the Picture Loan Society. There is quite a new element in these exhibitions, all except the Emily Carr paintings, one of politics I should say, all proletariat and red. This is interesting because it carries conviction.”³⁷

McInnes avoided calling it red, but his essay “New Horizons In Canadian Art” defined and celebrated that new element spreading out from the graphic arts and first appearing among Montreal artists who “looked out of their back windows and saw two things: an immediate, interesting activity of people, and significant formal relationships.” In Toronto, it came out in artists such as Schaefer who painted “the land as it looks after Canadians have tilled it, lived by it and died in it.” The top tier of McInnes’s new movement included *New Frontier* artists Nathan Petroff, Laurence Hyde, Fritz Brandtner, and Louis Muhlstock, as well as Schaefer, Paraskeva Clark, Pegi Nicol, Miller Brittain, and Leonard Hutchinson (a linocut and woodcut artist who was president of the Canadian Society of Graphic Art). In these artists, McInnes found a new focus on people and work that existed in a fine synthesis with a modernist emphasis on form.

McInnes’s essay amounted to a manifesto, a form rare enough in English Canadian art though important throughout cultural modernity. He observed that the antagonism between modernism and regional art that existed in the US was not present here; instead, a synthesis was developing. This was an interesting way of making Canadian painting unique. McInnes tried hardest of all Canadian critics to promote artists who were struggling toward an art that was modern and at the

* And the artist Pegi Nicol remarked that the book made her “feel happier to enjoy the Old Masters without doing so surreptitiously,” that it relieved the mind “so that we may enjoy the present movements in art springing up around the world” – surrealism, US regionalism, and even “the propaganda painting in the countries where the artists are part of the life” (review of Abell’s *Representation and Form*, *Canadian Forum* 16, no. 190 [November 1936]: 30–1).

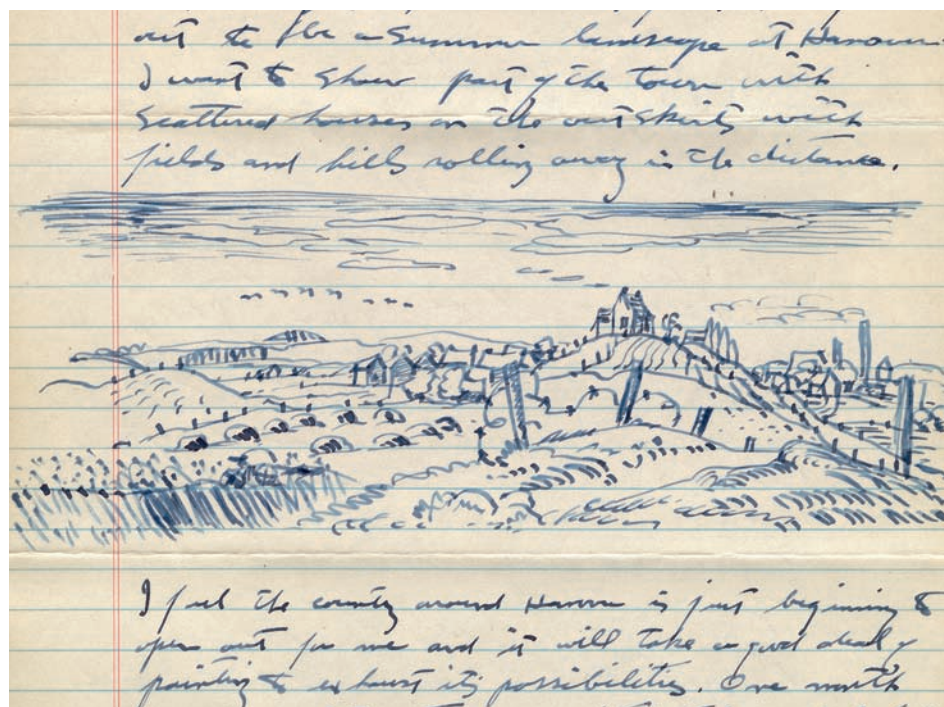


Fig. 4.5

Carl Schaefer, from a letter to his friend Clyde Dankert, 5 April 1937. Clyde Edward and Betty Dankert fonds, e011180573, Library and Archives Canada.

Schaefer describes here a painting he is planning: “I want to show part of the town with scattered houses on the outskirts with fields and hills rolling away in the distance. I find the country around Hanover is just beginning to open out for me and it will take a good deal of painting to exhaust its possibilities.”

same time socially and politically engaged. “New Horizons in Canadian Art” presented his most advanced ideas on the subject, developed in the heat of the debate on art and society, and it should be seen as a climax of that debate.

Not that the larger Canadian population cared or even knew about this debate, which, in published form, appeared mostly in small journals. Even the *Canadian Forum*, with all its intentions to be a national magazine, was printing only 1,500 copies of its monthly issues in 1936 and 1937,* and the *New Frontier*, a partisan monthly, would have been read by even fewer people. Neither McInnes’s “New Horizons” nor the conversation that it joined could much affect the longer view. McInnes himself either lost faith in the movement almost immediately or decided it had lost faith in itself, for although he went on judging art by its success as a synthesis of form and sensitivity to experience, his 1939 book *A Short History of Canadian Art* describes a “painful indecision” in contemporary Canadian painting in spite of outstanding individual work.³⁸ Twenty-eight years later, McInnes, by then

* By contrast, *Saturday Night* printed some thirty thousand copies (McKim’s *Directory of Canadian Publications*, 223).

Canada's permanent delegate to UNESCO, published a memoir on the period without even mentioning the Spanish Civil War, the *New Frontier*, or any but one or two of the artists he had praised in the article.³⁹

Still, "New Horizons in Canadian Art" reflects powerfully on a vivid moment in Canadian art history. It offers a new way of looking at works of art that may today seem socially and politically neutral, but that were really engagements with what Paraskeva Clark, in "Come Out From Behind the Pre-Cambrian Shield," called "the raw, sappy life that moves ceaselessly about you."



To understand these engagements, one must look hard at the work in its original context. Marilyn McKay, discussing Canada's lack of overt political painting in the thirties (works on paper were a different matter), commented that English Canadian artists frequently did make "veiled critiques" of social, economic, and political troubles, and that their figure paintings and even their landscapes sometimes took on a more sober or even menacing tone than the work of the previous decade.⁴⁰ These veiled critiques are what one must look for. It is also important to keep in mind that even artists with leftist sympathies sometimes chose to keep those crises out of their art, though they were caught up in them and sometimes took action in other ways. The Montreal painter Jori Smith, a member of the social democratic League for Social Reconstruction, said "oh, we were emotionally terribly upset" about the Spanish Civil War. "We lived on the radio. We read the newspapers. For years we kept boxes and boxes of cuttings from newspapers about that. It was the most moving experience of our lives. It was so terrible, so awful."⁴¹ But her work never responded to this or to any political events, though as Édith-Anne Pageot explains, Smith's drawings and paintings of the people of rural Quebec, her home for much of this period, certainly reflected her social conscience.⁴² Similarly, without being overtly political, the remarkable numbers of important Jewish artists in Montreal in the thirties showed "a certain social humanism" in much of their art,* as Esther Trépanier put it, especially in their drawings and prints. Louis Muhlstock was the greatest example, but Jack Beder and Ernst Neumann and others were also important, as were some Montreal artists outside the Jewish community.⁴³ Muhlstock himself was very clear that his participation in anti-fascist activities had nothing to do with his art, and that his interest in the human figure had nothing to do with any kind of "development" in Canadian art: "No, it wasn't a development; it was an atmosphere" – the atmosphere of an impoverished part of Montreal. "It was something I had *known* and experienced and seen, and so it was the thing I wanted to express."⁴⁴

Marian Scott is another important example. She is often quoted as saying that in those extreme times "I could not (or should not) 'use' my painting directly, but

* The poet Leo Kennedy had written about this humanism in a fascinating 1931 article on Ernst Neumann: "The Jew in art is seldom a creator of abstract beauty: he is forever concerned with the life about him" ("Portrait of an Artist: Ernest Newman Sits for an Intimate Sketch," *The Jewish Standard* [Montreal], 12 June 1931, 589).



Fig. 4.6

Lilias Torrance Newton, *Louis Muhlstock*, ca. 1937. Oil on canvas, 63.8 × 61.2 cm. Royal Canadian Academy of Arts diploma work, deposited by the artist, Montreal, 1940. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, accession no. 4552. Photo: NGC.

Lilias Torrance Newton was only the third woman to be granted full membership in the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, in 1937, and she was once described wryly by a conservative critic as “a painter with sympathies to the modern school but whose judgment and good taste direct and control her work” (“Triple Art Show Possesses Appeal: Albert Robinson’s Landscapes and Lilias Newton’s Portraits Are Satisfying,” *Gazette* [Montreal], 16 November 1931). This portrait was her “masterpiece,” the painting officially accepted by the Academy and deposited in the National Gallery as a sign of her professional status. She was, and is, recognized as one of the best portrait painters in Canada.

I could use some of myself, some of my time ... Of course my painting was ‘affected’ by the times. How much? How should I know? More stark, more ‘public’ than it might have been?”⁴⁵ She was a dedicated social democrat: “In the modern world there is no real democracy short of socialism.”⁴⁶ “I organized a peace group, I distributed tracts, I went to political meetings,”⁴⁷ and she produced a little ephemeral propaganda, as mentioned earlier, but the main body of her work was not directly political. Still, it reflected its time:

I had the feeling that one must give form to that which floated in the air of the moment, must reveal it, express the essence of the present, of the contemporaneity that had not been manifested before. At that time, few painters interested themselves in city scenes, streets, the port, the immediate, everyday environment: grain silos, cement factory, escalator, etc. It was an experimental field ... The “leisure society” of beaches and parasols, the opulent olympias à la Renoir that Lyman loved, all that didn’t correspond to the feeling, to the difficulty of being of the epoch.⁴⁸

This is much like Louis Muhlstock's statement about "atmosphere."^{*} While Marian Scott was very attentive in her work to formal qualities, she speaks not of those qualities but rather of giving form to the moment in terms of content. Scott's particular modernism is reflected most strikingly in this 1935 fragment from her journal:

Why do I paint? – Only work, Art, is precise, everlastingly itself, everlastingly dependable – so I paint.

Why do I paint? – I want to outdistance disaster, so I paint.⁴⁹

There are many ways to live ethically through a crisis, and many honest choices an artist can make about moral duty in such times. The documents that follow this narrative reflect the diversity of these choices.



Norman Bethune returned from Spain in June 1937, two months after the infamous civilian bombing of the Basque town of Guernica, as German and Italian support for Franco's forces intensified. Once back in Canada, Bethune spent the summer helping to raise money and support for the Spanish Republic's cause. He continued to be involved with artists, including Paraskeva Clark, with whom he had an affair (always mentioned by her biographers and historians, and never by his), and Marian Scott, with whom he had a deep emotional bond but not an affair, and from whom he learned much about art and politics. The *New Frontier* died four months after McInnes's essay "New Horizons in Canadian Art" appeared. The Japanese had just captured Beijing, and the following year Germany annexed Austria. The fascists took over Spain, and in 1939 the Spanish Republic ended, as did, far away in China, the life of Norman Bethune, who contracted a fatal infection while on another medical-political mission. The United Front concept crumbled, as did the sympathy and hope of many Western artists and intellectuals for the Soviet Union when Hitler made a non-aggression pact with Stalin a week before Germany invaded Poland, and the Second World War began.

THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR AND THE MORAL DUTY OF ARTISTS: ARTISTS' AND CRITICS' WRITINGS

The writings for this chapter begin with the brief statement that accompanied Fritz Brandtner's 1936 exhibition at the Morgan gallery. That show of 120 pieces, mostly drawings and small paintings of landscapes and urban scenes, included a few works

^{*} Kirk Niergarth in his book *"The Dignity of Every Human Being"* has, like me, found Muhlstock's concept of "atmosphere" important, so much so that he entitled his first chapter "The Atmosphere: Art and Politics in Canadian Magazines, 1935–1939." Niergarth begins the chapter with the quote from Muhlstock seen above.

reflecting his experience of the Great War, and thus became an important occasion for critical comment on art and society.* The tone of the exhibition statement reflects a similarity to the ideas of Louis Muhlstock, Marian Scott, and Paraskeva Clark as I described them above.

Reviewing Brandtner's exhibition, the Montreal critic Robert Ayre seemed comfortable with the idea that there is a "sermon to be preached" in works such as *Modern War and Gas Attack*, even if Canadians, lacking direct experience of war, "pay little attention to this function of painting."⁵⁰ Another Montreal critic, Reynald (Ephrem-Réginald Bertrand), remarked that "All these grotesque groups wearing gas masks ... speak out so eloquently against chemical warfare that it's precisely under the auspices of the Canadian League Against War and Fascism that this exhibition is held."⁵¹ But in the second document below, the critic Henri Girard disagreed, in strong terms, with this sympathy for the few overtly political works in the show, and that is how he ends his review, after praising Brandtner's abilities. Graham McInnes happened to take the same line as Girard in his own generally positive review of Brandtner's show: "In painting as in thought, Mr. Brandtner is definitely of the left, but his appeal is most cogent when he is not pre-occupied with propaganda. Many of his anti-war pictures fail aesthetically through too much insistence on the social message they are intended to convey, and, personally, I know of very few instances in which art and propaganda have been successfully fused."⁵² This leeriness of propaganda was in fact the dominant position in Canada.

The third document, a review of Louis Muhlstock's 1935 solo exhibition by Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau, is a superb consideration of another way in which an artist might address a difficult era: through the expression of profound human compassion.

Next is Charles Comfort, in one of the position statements by "prominent Canadians" collected by the *New Frontier* for its December 1936 special issue on the Spanish Civil War. Comfort, then director of the Department of Mural Painting at the Ontario College of Art, shows the urgency felt by left-leaning intellectuals as fascist forces bombed Madrid and as the war escalated.

The three pieces following Comfort's statement are excerpts from the famous debate that followed Bertram Brooker's "Art and Society" essay. The first is from Frank Underhill's putdown of Brooker. The next is from Elizabeth Wyn Wood's attack on Underhill's article, really her own position paper, very much from an Ontario perspective, on art and social responsibility. Wyn Wood's piece is followed by an excerpt from Paraskeva Clark's rebuttal.

Then comes a series of excerpts from Walter Abell's book *Representation and Form*, an important work on aesthetics by an influential figure in Canadian art of the thirties and forties. Abell seems to have written this book with a great wish to

* This show was also the first occasion when abstract art was exhibited in Montreal, as Roald Nasgaard observed, although that fact seems to have slipped by the critics (Nasgaard, *Abstract Painting in Canada*, 54).

Fig. 4.7

Fritz Brandtner. Photograph by Walter Abell, ca. 1935. Image courtesy of Library and Archives, National Gallery of Canada.



end the widespread artistic and critical dependence on Clive Bell's concept of significant form, and especially to put down Bell's idea that subject matter is irrelevant. Abell's concept of representational form provided a critical basis for the "identification of the humanist aesthetic in Canadian painting" of the period, according to Anna Hudson.⁵³

Next is Graham McInnes's "New Horizons in Canadian Art," in which he goes beyond his previous Abell-like position of valuing sensitivity to environment while giving priority to formal qualities, and finds a way to emphasize social engagement in art.

The final document in this chapter is an excerpt from Norman Bethune's "Apology for Not Writing Letters," an attempt to articulate, out of his profound respect for creativity, what art can and must accomplish in a world in crisis. It is not surprising that to explain his idea of art, this communist would turn to the Marxist method of thesis-antithesis-synthesis.

Statement for the Montreal exhibition of Fritz Brandtner's paintings, 1936*

Brandtner's exhibition was presented by the League Against War and Fascism, a United Front group. Brandtner himself was a member of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, first in Winnipeg, to which he had immigrated in 1928, and then in Montreal, where he lived from 1934; and he was in sympathy with the League's goals.

* Statement for exhibition of Fritz Brandtner's paintings at Henry Morgan and Company, Montreal, 15–29 February 1936. A copy of the printed statement is in volume 23, file 32 of the J. Russell Harper fonds.

Although he did not share Norman Bethune's radical politics, they were close friends and lived for a time in the same apartment building in Montreal, and sometimes painted together. Bethune learned much about art from Brandtner,⁵⁴ and Bethune arranged the Morgan exhibition. We do not know who wrote this statement but it seems plausible that Bethune did, or he and Brandtner together.

Fritz Brandtner received his Art training at the University of the Free City of Danzig and has been living in Canada for the past eight years. He is a member of the Canadian Society of Painters in Water Colour and has exhibited in Danzig, Berlin, Winnipeg, Regina, Toronto and Montreal.

Mr. Brandtner's objective in art is not merely to copy nature, but to create a picture which shall be a translation of nature seen through the inward eye. He believes that our future progress depends, not on fighting against new movements, but on educating ourselves to understand them and to accept the living forces about us.

To-day, when culture and progress the world over are in immediate danger of being destroyed by the threat of Fascism and the ever increasing menace of War, the artist can be a tremendously vital force on the side of democracy and peace. We believe that more and more, Canadian artists are coming to realize the crucial struggle which is taking place in our time between the forces of progress and those of reaction. Their art affords them a powerful medium through which they may interpret existing conditions and express their opposition to those forces which tend to bring about the destruction of cultural developments.

It is because Mr. Brandtner is a leader in this progressive movement in Canadian art that the League Against War and Fascism is happy to have this opportunity of presenting an exhibition of his work.

Henri Girard, from "La vie artistique – Fritz Brandtner," 1936*

Now, what makes the intelligence of M. Brandtner's works particularly difficult is that they appear at first look to be "foreign." One would say that the artist was shaped by studying Hans and Lucas Cranach, whom his work resembles.

They are distant ancestors – for M. Brandtner, sincere interpreter of the anxiety of our era, is a true creator. Original, inventive, even to the subtlest nuances



Fig. 4.8
Fritz Brandtner, *Non-Combatants*, 1935, from *New Frontier* 1, no. 2 (May 1936): 17. Image courtesy of Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.

* Henri Girard, "La vie artistique – Fritz Brandtner," *Le Canada* (Montreal), 26 February 1936. Translation © Lola Lemire Tostevin.

and the most unexpected harmonies, he has a strength of style and an extraordinary ability in art to suggest what he does not say. He also has the courage to paint according to his temperament, not in order to offend the bourgeoisie, as the thoughtless claim, but without caring whether he offends them or gives them pleasure.

Further, M. Brandtner has the boldness – in this milieu, it is a virtue – to confide his thoughts and his sentiments to his picture: he confides to it his horror of war as much as the virile joy of setting sail under a summer sky. He disregards cumbersome details and simplifies expression to obtain vigor, because he, this very twentieth-century spirit, is obsessed, perhaps unconsciously, with the idea that life is short. “To paint,” said André Lhôte, “is essentially to choose among the *contradictory* elements that a spectacle offers us.” I would say then that M. Brandtner knows how to choose, and he is never contented to take on someone else’s choices.

Ultimately, one does not know how to define the truth, the imagination, and even the charm of the watercolours and pencil drawings shown in the little room. The amateur who wants to understand the art of M. Brandtner should see these works first. When they have studied them for a little while, they will be won over and the artist’s most audacious creations will not scandalize them.

A last word. I would not accept the works in which M. Brandtner has expressed the horror of war if they had been created for anti-fascism or any other goal. One does not tolerate well the idea that art can make itself “useful,” that it can preach, teach, or lecture. It is possible that the expression of such a sentiment sometimes happens to support or refute a political doctrine. But, art should not submit itself to utilitarian ends, even to save democracy. It is and should remain above the political melee. The artist too is a “scholar” in the sense given to that word by Julien Benda:* if he makes himself a propagandist, if he puts art at the service of political ideas, he collaborates in hastening the world’s advance toward “the end of the eternal.”

Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau, “Chronique des beaux-arts: Louis Muhlstock,” 1936[†]

The Quebec poet Saint-Denys Garneau appeared earlier in this book with his wonderful critique of David Milne’s exhibition. Here he writes about Louis Muhlstock’s third solo show, held in the Print Room of the Art Association of Montreal from 16 October to 27 November 1935. The show had at least two positive newspaper

* In *La trahison des clercs* (*The Treason of the Scholars*) (Paris: B. Grasset 1927), the philosopher and novelist Julien Benda blames intellectuals for failing to hold to universal principles and instead taking political positions and joining “the chorus of hatreds” that created the First World War. Benda wrote a second book, *La fin de l’éternel* (Paris: Gallimard 1929), that is referred to in the last sentence above.

[†] Saint-Denys Garneau, “Chronique des beaux-arts: Louis Muhlstock,” *La Relève* 2, no. 5 (January 1936): 158–60. Translation © Lola Lemire Tostevin.

Fig. 4.9

Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau, August 1939 (date on back of photograph). Université Laval, Division de la gestion des documents administratifs et des archives, P468/A,5. Facultatif: Collection Fondation de Saint-Denys-Garneau, Don Simonne Gourdeau-Lemire / Carte mortuaire et photographies de Saint-Denys Garneau et carte postale de Ste-Cathérine.

*reviews in addition to this one, and four of the drawings that hung there were reproduced in the Canadian Forum.*⁵⁵

*Garneau was one of a group of young writers whom Louis Muhlstock had gotten to know upon his return from studies in Paris some four years earlier. “Long conversations,” Muhlstock recalled of those friendships, “music – records everywhere, contact with minds that looked beyond appearances – made this period one of the best of my life.”*⁵⁶ *Garneau as well as two others from that group of friends, Jean Le Moynes and Robert Élie, were closely associated with the liberal Montreal journal La Relève, where this essay appeared.*



A solo exhibition and the autumn salon brought to our attention some beautiful drawings by Louis Muhlstock: several portraits, a few groups of figures, sketches drawn from life, nude studies. Everyone tried to identify the strange and penetrating impact released by a collection that transformed an exhibition room into a most unusual world. There is something here that relates to the mood of novels and paintings by D.H. Lawrence, the famous English novelist. The gaze these figures share encapsulates an overall impression that makes it impossible not to sense something morbid.* An impression so profound it reveals a kind of nihilism, something pending, desperation not entirely of one's making coupled with sadness turned inward. Mr. Muhlstock is not always kind toward the human face, but his bitterness is never without tenderness toward features marked by misery and depravity, a compassion that doesn't come necessarily from the faces themselves but from the compassionate artist.

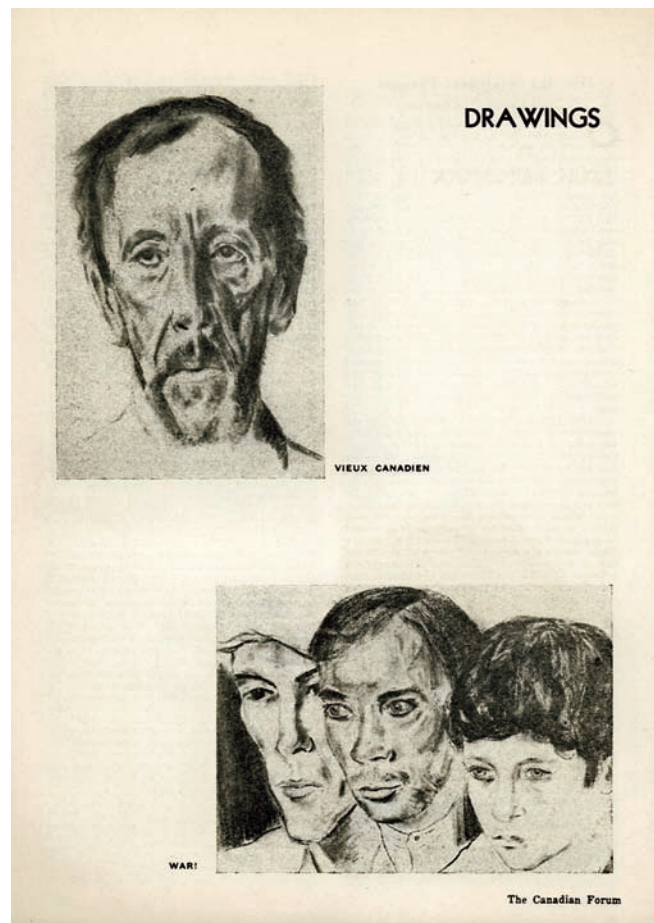
There is more than melancholy behind those gazes, there is ardent obsession conveying a warning, sometimes against disillusion, sometimes against the unpredictable exasperation that is being projected to the surface. One detects

* The critic Henri Girard said in his review of the show that although the word “morbid” might come to mind it wasn't quite right; rather, the drawings made Muhlstock seem “a man of extreme sensibility who suffered from the rudeness of the world” and who had an immense human sympathy that was perhaps totally new to Canadian art (“Les dessins de Louis Muhlstock,” *Le Canada* [Montreal], 28 November 1935). It was Henri Girard who drew Saint-Denys Garneau's attention to Muhlstock's show (Papillon-Boisclair, *L'école du regard*, 67).

Figs. 4.10a and 4.10b

Louis Muhlstock, *Vieux canadien* and *War!* as reproduced in the *Canadian Forum* 15, no. 181 (February 1936): 16.

These drawings were in Muhlstock's 1935 show of sixty-six drawings at the Art Association of Montreal. Saint-Denys Garneau speaks of *War!* in his review.



the beginning of upheaval in most of the faces, a characteristic trait to which one is so profoundly drawn; at times it's as if they were about to dissolve before our eyes. Faces that are rarely strong, but are nevertheless intense and threatened by the sum of their desire.

Most of the portraits of adolescents, *European Youth* for example, with their too large eyes full of lethargy, gloomy faces that could also be offhand portraits of disillusioned women, are very revealing. I don't believe I am straying too far in detecting great nostalgia and, similarly, a mournful search for a less ambiguous youth. The intimate compassion for all the sad destinies captured by the artist is at the very core of his inspiration.* Everywhere there is an indicator of something irretrievably lost.

This feeling of the irrevocable couples with and is tempered by the sensual melancholia of the gazes, which gives a more spiritual sensibility, one that is more profoundly humane.

* H.M. Caiserman had observed that Muhlstock's children (and grandmothers) had "a certain Jewish intellectualism and pronounced sadness, 'rassen-sorg,'" that "explains why they appear older than their normal age as judged by the standard of Anglo-Saxon surroundings" (H.M. Caiserman, "The Art of Bercovitch and Muhlstock," *Jewish Standard* [Montreal], 14 April 1933, 225).

We should not get the wrong idea: Louis Muhlstock's talent is exempt from vulgarity. In the atmosphere he creates, the sensual quality of the tension indicates, in a certain sense, a burden, but it is as if it were enclosed in purity and thereby acquires a human quality well above vulgarity. It evokes dissatisfaction, but also aspires to serene acceptance. It is reminiscent of the tender and touching tone of Verlaine's poem *Voeu* (*Vow*).

Other than the portraits there are two nude studies in black and brick with a completely different character, where one feels a sense of distancing from that elusive melancholia, toward a command over full and heavy forms. A broadening that promises to bring together all the elements of this flexible and sensitive talent on a more open, freer plane.

There are also a few well-assembled nude sketches in red chalk in clear, sensitive lines, and a few other picturesque, lively and well balanced sketches drawn from life.

The versatility of Mr. Muhlstock's talent lies in his technique. It never deviates from an intense sensibility which excels at drawing the feminine figure. It is a sensibility adept at capturing secrets, bringing them to mind, but with great discretion, extreme gentleness, so that one never has the impression of violation or intrusion, or insistence that would provoke a retreat.

This comprehensive work, always in contact with and submitted to reality, is enhanced by the variety that life offers. It is without drudgery; the personal contribution expresses itself either through a distinct formal rhythm, or by discreet deformation that feeds the whole and gives it its intense and penetrating inner nature. It is of great simplicity, without affectation. For example, the human allegory representing war, the three figures exuding exasperation through wrath or crushed will, seems, by all human instincts, on the edge of madness, yet it is more striking by the very depth of its truth than all the accumulated buildings and complicated machinery by which war is so often represented.

This fresh new talent, spanning from subtle sensibility to vigour, promises a fusion full of complexity. In the completed works, this talent does not convey limits but seems to be on the verge of strengthening all its facets.

We are left with the impression that personal evolution and artistic form go hand in hand for Mr. Muhlstock. It is what lends his work a rare genuineness worthy of human observation: the matter of an engaged life.

Charles Comfort, "Where I Stand on Spain," 1936*

Comfort had strong business connections and was working at this time on the biggest artistic commission in the country: eight murals and a twenty-three-metre frieze for the Toronto Stock Exchange, which may explain why he was one of the

* Charles Comfort, "Where I Stand on Spain," *New Frontier* 1, no. 8 (December 1936): 13.



Fig. 4.11 Charles Comfort painting the Toronto Stock Exchange murals. Detail of photograph, February 1937. Charles Comfort fonds, Library and Archives Canada.

The very large Stock Exchange commission included eight murals, each sixteen feet high and four feet wide, as well as a stone frieze on the building's facade. The panels, all researched and designed by Comfort, depict Canadian industries, and in this photo he is working near the bottoms of the engineering and agriculture panels. Graham McInnes remarked that "to escape from realism into the romanticism of either the pioneer or the bridgebuilder would have been easy. Comfort refused to do this ... Behind an informatively synoptic view of a certain industry, arranged in a coherent design, lie deeper implications" (McInnes, "Contemporary Canadian Artists: No. 3 – Charles F. Comfort," 18).

"prominent Canadians" chosen by the New Frontier to talk about the war in Spain. But he was at the same time a close associate of Toronto's leftist artists. Here he denounces not only the fascists but also the democracies who do nothing to stop them.

For anyone trained in the practice and appreciation of the more pacific activities of democratic existence; for anyone who believes that sociology, art, and science can only make ultimate progress in a world adjusted and peaceful; for anyone who abhors war as a barbarism civilization should long have outgrown, the appalling spectacle of the Spanish civil war is like a horrible nightmare from which there is no sudden release or awakening.

The democratic nations watch mutely the bloody assassination of a sister state, the murder of innocent women and children, the slaughter of a youthful militia who took up arms only to protect those institutions which we are daily reminded are our heritage as British subjects – freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, freedom to elect our representatives to a democratic parliament, and freedom to pursue our scientific and cultural activities as intelligent individuals. If the gangster methods being employed to subjugate the

Spanish people are successful, does it not follow that the successful technique will be employed elsewhere?

Frank H. Underhill, from a review of *The Yearbook of the Arts in Canada*, 1936*

It is interesting now to go back and read the articles of the 1929 yearbook[†] or look over its reproductions of paintings. What strikes one about them is how they date. That first yearbook, in other words, fulfilled its purpose as a yearbook almost perfectly. It is full of the spirit of 1929. There is a challenge in the writing, the book itself is about a manifesto. We Canadians, it seems to say, we Men of the North with our pre-Cambrian Shield, are going to show the world [...]

Now one naturally asks, when one turns to the yearbook of 1936, what effect seven years of a world depression have had upon the tone and outlook of Canadian artists. For the depression has made us conscious that we face not merely an economic but a spiritual crisis in our civilization. In Europe that long era of individualism and liberalism which began with the Renaissance is closing in revolution, and men are having to decide whether they will go fascist or communist. European artists have been compelled to rethink the whole question of the relation of the artist to society, and the finer spirits among them, as far as I can make out, are deciding one after another that in our troubled generation the artist must be red or dead. Similar developments may be observed in Rooseveltian United States. What has been the impact of these world-shaking events upon Canadian artists? I cannot find any evidence in this volume. There is certain sardonic and bitter humour in some of the poems (these, of course, are from *The Canadian Forum*), but beyond this there is not much sign that Canadian artists have been moved by the phenomenon of a civilization dissolving before their eyes. Mr. Brooker indeed, in his introduction on Art and Society, seems to warn the artist against any temptation to become involved in these agonizing controversies of our day. But perhaps I misinterpret him. I find him more comprehensible when he expresses his mysticism in lines and paint than when he tries to do it in words.

Elizabeth Wyn Wood, from “Art and the Pre-Cambrian Shield,” 1937[‡]

[Mr. Underhill’s] general aversion to the natural background and subject matter of most Canadian Art is already known. In the December *Forum* he asks: “What effect seven years of a world depression have had on the tone and outlook of

* Frank H. Underhill, from a review of *The Yearbook of the Arts in Canada*, *Canadian Forum* 16, no. 91 (December 1936): 27–8. © Canadian Forum Foundation.

† *The Yearbook of the Arts in Canada* 1928–1929.

‡ Elizabeth Wyn Wood, from “Art and the Pre-Cambrian Shield,” *Canadian Forum* 16, no. 193 (February 1937): 13–15.

Fig. 4.12

Charles Comfort, *Portrait Sketch: Elizabeth Wyn Wood Hahn*. As reproduced in *Canadian Forum* 11, no. 128 (May 1931): 308. Whereabouts of original unknown.



Canadian artists? For the depression has made us conscious that we face not merely an economic but a spiritual crisis in our civilization ... In Europe men are having to decide whether they will go fascist or communist. European artists have been compelled to rethink the whole question of the relation of the artist to society, and the finer spirits among men, as far as I can make out, are deciding one after another that in our troubled generation the artist must be red or dead ... What has been the impact of these world-shaking events upon Canadian artists? I cannot find any evidence ... that Canadian artists have been moved by the phenomenon of a civilization dissolving before their eyes."

It is precisely here that the Canadian artist has been a trail-blazer. He has always had some doubt about the importance of civilization. He has only partly accepted it. He has walked off into the hinterland at every opportunity. With explorers, backwoodsmen, even farmers and villagers, he has felt the spell of reality, knowing that the organization, the gadgets and the dealings of civilization were somehow not the be-all either of life or of culture. He has therefore leaned very heavily upon the wilderness for spiritual stimulation and nourishment, a fact which Mr. Underhill has noted with scorn. It should not surprise him however, that the artist should remain unimpressed by the dissolution.

A long procession of artists have taken the trail. Krieghoff painted pot boilers in Quebec and masterpieces on Lake Superior. Warre made his drawings of the west before the boundary between Oregon and British Columbia was settled. Paul Kane lived and painted among the Indians. The Totem carvers of the west coast accepted the white man's tools, carved their poles, and had misgivings about the coming civilization. They made great sculpture before they fell, the noblest monumental art between Egypt and the grain elevator. On through the years the pioneers trooped to the wilds: Bellsmith to the mountains, Reid to Algoma, Beatty to Algonquin. Many have felt the lure from across the seas. Tom Thomson grew like a pine tree on the rocks. The Group of Seven, inspired, shouted their triumph. Jackson and Harris touched the Arctic. Yvonne McKague found the earth meeting man in Sudbury and Coppercliff. They are numberless now – spreading through the bush, the plains, the hills. Myself, I have lain on the rock between the sky and the water and I have remembered that thousands of men, in different parts of the world, throughout all the ages have lived in peace, in happiness and in creative energy without knowing the organization we call civilization.

What should we do instead? Paint castles in Spain – crumbling? Paint the Russian proletariat standing on the fallen Cossack, a modern Saint George and the Dragon? Or shall we paint guns standing in rows, waiting? Such things are not authentic stimuli to the Canadian artist. Should we then turn to our own oppressors – make cynical statues of the academic capitalist with his paunch and silk hat? We have not the appetite. Our millionaires are fine fellows who mush through the north as we do, eating hardtack and bully beef, and sometimes having their own doubts. Moreover, if they are lucky enough to bring in a mine or two, the worst that can be said of them is that they are digging up gold for the People's Government to confiscate by and by ...

However, the Canadian artist is not entirely insensitive to world conditions. On the contrary, when in 1929 Mr. Underhill found him singing in the wilderness, he was singing, not in unawareness that he was in the midst of an economic boom, but in exultation. His values were then, as they are now, independent of that boom. And if he seems presently numbed by world shock, there is nevertheless within him a deep passion for the slow and solid life this continent gives. Canadian artists are mostly sons of pioneers who left the old lands, with their unhappy civilizations, outworn customs, hatreds, oppressions and prestige manias to come to a wilderness, free and hopeful, and who have found peace and some measure of fulfilment along with the half-civilization they have made. Nor does nationalism bound our consciousness. Modern communication and the continuing peace of our land have made us at least continental. The pulse beat behind American architecture, Mexican murals, Canadian painting, and all the North American engineering arts is our life force. Incomplete as they may be, and surrounded still with a matrix of derivation, these arts are nevertheless more vital today than the contemporary

arts of the “red and dead” Europeans. And we are stretching! Many hands and many ideas may function in so vast a field.

The artist, as much as any one, will welcome the new social order if and when it comes. Able to work under almost any conditions, he would obviously work more happily in security. The accomplishment of Periclean Athens is an example of such planning. The W.P.A. in the United States may be a step in that direction, but it is still an emergency measure rather than a permanent plan. A modern social art should transcend Greece in magnitude of projection and in liberal philosophy. Art has been, and could be again, the glory of a people in her high period and sustaining in her morale in times of depression. America is, psychologically, almost ready.

Only in reception are the European peoples more acute than we. The artist everywhere works sincerely, but since all arts are conditioned to some extent by the layman, his portion of responsibility should be recognized in this country [...] That art should be expected to express, in almost illustrative terms, an economic depression or a political theory is to limit appreciation to such an extent as to cause a serious deficiency at least in the audience, and perhaps ultimately in the artist. Wars, depressions, peace and social security influence the arts, but art does not necessarily document these events. It may only be slowed down or exhilarated by them. Geography and current taste are much more discernible in the work of a place or period, but these, also, have no essential artistic significance. Such things modify the form only, and their interest is chiefly historical.

I proclaim the long stride, the far vision, the free spirit. I propose we set our house in order according to our own problems, needs and aspirations. And, if we are tired of the mess in our house, let us camp for a while on our northern pre-Cambrian shield. Let us have criticism that is sound and technical, let us have sincere, understanding receptivity. Let us not fear simplicity. We shall need health and we shall need space. Some day we may have to take in the refugees from a smouldering civilization. We may have to offer them more than bread. We may have to offer them the spiritual sustenance of an art which grows on the bare rock and bare chests.

Paraskeva Clark, from “Come Out From Behind the Pre-Cambrian Shield,” 1937*

The byline to this article was “as told to Graham McInnes.” No doubt McInnes, also in the circle of Toronto socialists at this point, had major responsibility for its diction, for English was a third language for Clark, after Russian and French.

* Paraskeva Clark, from “Come Out From Behind the Pre-Cambrian Shield,” *New Frontier* 1, no. 12 (April 1937): 16–17.



Fig. 4.13

Paraskeva Clark. Detail of photograph by Charles Comfort, October 1938. Charles Fraser Comfort fonds, e002282819, Library and Archives Canada, accession number 1987-139 NPC.

Art and the function of the artist are subjects very difficult to discuss with understanding and simplicity. It requires a very competent and sensitive critic to present a discussion on art to the public, and arouse their sympathy in interest. But though I take leave to doubt whether Mr. F.H. Underhill is one of these, his criticism of Mr. Bertram Brooker's Year Book of the Arts in Canada is very welcome, even though it represents a strident and almost reflex outcry against the complacency and self-satisfied remoteness of the "Art and Artists of the Pre-Cambrian Shield."

Mr. Underhill states that "the finer spirits among the European artists are deciding, one after another, that *in our troubled generation* (my italics) the artist must be red or dead." The roughness of this definition of the artist's duty toward society made one of the finer spirits among Canadian artists, Elizabeth Wyn Wood, express publicly her annoyance and indignation at the use of such vulgar and earthy words as "red or dead" in connection with the divine nature of the artistic personality. Red art has for Miss Wood only the conventionally standardized meaning (the tell-tale sign of careless thinking) of "endless portraits of Lenin and Stalin ... the Russian proletariat standing on the fallen cossack, a modern St. George and the dragon ... castles in Spain crumbling." That last remark is significant, for it shows how the exaltation of the individual can blind an artist to the

forces which approach to destroy that relative security in which he is permitted to exercise his individuality. Miss Wood's aloofness, and that of others like her, from the real life of their country, make them all oblivious to what is going on around them.

The throb of the people's struggle toward a better life appears to be of no importance to art and the artist. Who is the artist? Is he not a human being like ourselves, with the added gifts of finer understanding and perception of the realities of life, and the ability to arouse emotions through the creation of forms and images? Surely. And this being so, those who give their lives, their knowledge and their time to social struggle have the right to expect great help from the artist. And I cannot imagine a more inspiring role than that which the artist is asked to play for the defence and advancement of civilisation. How sad it is to see that such an appeal is treated only as "a presently fashionable wave wherein the idea of art as propaganda is easy to comprehend ... serving the party, diarizing current experience ... a mild epidemic of the Early Christian Martyr-Communist Oxford Group fever, which demands the consecration of all talent to the services of a readily recognizable cause." These glib epigrammatic phrases betray an appalling and absolutely unexpected lack of insight; yet they are symptomatic of much thought today.

It is strange that when so many people feel thus, they detect no contradiction in the consecration of their talent to the much more readily recognizable idea of royalty. Perhaps the answer is that one brings a livelihood; the other, however – the "red or dead" variety – brings life. Think of that, Artist of the pre-Cambrian Shield, who twenty, perhaps even ten years ago might have been performing a valuable function in arousing your people to a sense of their country's beauty. But that has been done and it is time to come down from your ivory tower, to come out from behind your pre-Cambrian Shield and dirty your gown in the mud and sweat of conflict. You need not be afraid of losing your individuality; that is impossible if you are convinced of the rightness of your cause. It is only possible if feeling and action are divorced by internal conflict.

Forget, if you wish, the troubles of Europe; there are plenty here. Paint the raw, sappy life that moves ceaselessly about you, paint portraits of your own Canadian leaders, depict happy dreams for your Canadian souls. But if you cannot do all this, for it is a new and difficult problem, at least have the grace to refrain from being scornful of those who do, those who are saying necessary things, and proving of immense value to their time. Think of yourself as a human being, and you cannot help feeling the reality of life around you, and becoming impregnated with it.

It is all very well to lie on a rock, between sky and water, brooding over "the thousands of men in different parts of the world throughout all the ages who have lived in peace and happiness and creative energy, without knowing the organization we call civilization." But if thousands lived in peace and happiness



Fig. 4.14

A party in Toronto, perhaps on New Year's Eve. Late 1930s, possibly at the home of Gordon and Doris Davies (Anon., Arts and Letters Club of Toronto, *Newsletter*, February 1983, 4). Front row: Elizabeth Wyn Wood, Paraskeva Clark, Will Ogilvie. Second row: Doris Davies, Charles Comfort. Back row: [unidentified], Emmanuel Hahn, Louise Comfort, Gordon Davies. Paraskeva and Phillip T. Clark fonds, e006078602, Library and Archives Canada.

"One of the things that is difficult to imagine now," said Louise Comfort, "is the fact that in Toronto at that time, the body of artists was very close knit – those who were young and interested in similar things ... We picnicked, and partied, and lived, not only with the artists, but the musicians, and the writers, and the poets. They were all part of the climate at that time" (Louise Comfort, in an interview by Charles Hill, 3 October 1973). The tough-minded art-and-society debate that featured Elizabeth Wyn Wood and Paraskeva Clark, who are both in the front row of this photo, took place among those friendships.

(questionable attributes to any genuine creative artist) it was because other thousands suffered that they might do so. And you, artist of the Pre-Cambrian shield, have been born, unfortunately for your dreams, into an age when what one desires is not handed to one on a silver spoon, but has to be fought for, more grimly as each month goes by. It is to enable you to lie on a rock that castles are tumbling in Spain.

Out of brooding on the past comes only this precious, esoteric, abstract art, expressing the vague dreams of sophisticated artistic intellect; art whose divine irreality is lengthily discussed by sophisticated intellectuals; art as useful today as

a top hat to a tatterdemalion beggar in the midst of winter. Out of such broodings come such incredible heresies as an implied longing for the good old days of slavery, because in Egypt and Greece they produced “a marvelous, noble and monumental art;” a half felt desire for good old cannibalism in the African jungle, to enable us to produce beautiful totemic art. One is asked to believe that the human being does not matter, that it is no use bothering one’s head about him, for art will ever flourish.

But naturally it will, being as broad and deep as life itself; that is just the point. It is art that you do not need to bother your head about; it will go on. Rather, think of the human being, take actual part in your own times, find their expression and translate it, help your fellow man in the struggle for the future, and dream of the art which this future will produce. Why should we take it for granted that the artist should be left in the garret to paint his apples? He does this today because he is not now, as he will be in the future and as he was in the past, an integral part of a well ordered society, performing a necessary function. Let us dream, rather, of a studio for him, and work to make that dream a reality.

Oh artist, secure behind your Pre-Cambrian shield, why do these things not interest you? You, whose soul and mind understands the secret life of the forms of trees and rocks and skies, and is moved to tears by them. Why do the people and their struggles and their dreams not interest you? Are they considered unworthy to be expressed through your creative ability? There is more real happiness for you if you remember that you are one of them; and it is better to work out the destiny of your human nature, than to expect a divine one, an expectation over which you yourself cast a doubt, when you confess that the artist is influenced by the layman. But unhappily, too often the artist allows himself to be conditioned by the layman with position and influence.

At the present time, you wish to be left alone, not to be disturbed with requests to be either “red or dead,” quietly looking upon the “hysteria” of those who are giving their lives for a new social order, and condescending to reassure them that you will welcome this new order “if and when it comes.” And if it comes, you might be outside; your welcome would be useless, for you would not understand the language of this new order.

Walter Abell, from *Representation and Form*, 1936*

These very brief excerpts from Abell’s book show the bones of his argument, leaving out the side arguments, proofs, and examples. I have shown page numbers in brackets.

* Walter Abell, from *Representation and Form: A Study of Aesthetic Values in Representational Art*, introduction by Arthur Pope (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936).

Abell made no reference in the book to the contemporary world, or to any particular kind of subject. His examples are all from the European canon – no American or Canadian artists are mentioned, and no contemporary artists at all. However, he did apply these ideas to the work of Canadian artists elsewhere, especially in a long Canadian Forum article on the New Brunswick artist Jack Humphrey, whom he especially admired.⁵⁷ Also, as Sandra Paikowsky pointed out, Abell would offer the first ever course taught anywhere on Canadian art.⁵⁸

The book's publication was subsidized by the Carnegie Corporation, at a time when the Corporation was extending its arm all over the continent, including the Maritimes, where it saw a particular need; in fact Abell was in Maritime Canada on Carnegie funds.⁵⁹ Abell's aim in the Maritimes was to "awaken the eye" to both art and life, and he founded the Maritime Art Association, a club very local in its membership, to support exhibitions and lectures.⁶⁰

Upon no issue is contemporary art criticism more controversial, and in consequence less secure, than in dealing with the relation of "subject-matter" to aesthetic effect. The swing from representation to abstraction, which marked one phase of modern art, carried a corresponding phase of modern criticism with it. The artist, for the most part, has since manifested his creative freedom by making the counter-swing back toward representation, but the critic has not been able to follow the reverse movement so easily. He has been left with the problem of explaining the precise relationship between these two aspects of pictorial and sculptural art and has not, as yet, succeeded in explaining it satisfactorily to all concerned. [1]

In order to recall the points at issue, let us briefly review some of the pronouncements on this problem which have influenced critical thought in recent years. At one extreme, Mr. Clive Bell asserts that subject-matter is entirely unrelated to aesthetic value. "The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful: always it is irrelevant. For, to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions. Art transports us from the world of man's activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation ..." (Bell, *Art*, 25). People who can feel "pure aesthetic emotions ... as often as not have no idea what the subject of a picture is ... They are concerned only with lines and colors, their relations and quantities and qualities ..." (*Art*, 30) – in a word, with what Mr. Bell has attractively termed "Significant Form." [2]

Colors and lines are not intrinsically aesthetic – they may be ugly as well as beautiful. They affect aesthetic values only in so far as they become contributory to beauties of material, of form, or of expression, subserving them in the relation of means to end. Yet the modern critic has not, for this reason, seen fit to exclude them from aesthetic consideration. On the contrary, he has found that their

contributory function entitles them to serious study and analysis. Since plastic elements, not in themselves aesthetic, are thus found to be significant in their contributions to aesthetic effect, it is not illogical to suppose that representational elements might do likewise. We have certainly encountered no proof as yet that their relation to aesthetic values is negative or even neutral.

It will be useful for our study to analyze representation as closely as possible and to determine how it is related to the types of aesthetic value which we have recognized and to the chief other potential sources of such value, namely the plastic ones. Conversely, we must determine what effect is produced upon the aesthetic value of visual forms if representation is completely excluded from them. In order to investigate these and related problems, let us begin by reducing visual experience to its simplest elements and then progressively trace its development into higher and more complex states. Four such states or “strata” of vision will appear in the course of our analysis, each one built upon that which precedes it, the final stratum carrying us back to the fullness of visual reality. In each stratum we shall seek to observe what aesthetic effects are there possible, what the relation of these effects is to form and to representation, and what relation these two terms of our problem seem to bear to each other. [24–5]

Abell's first “stratum” is the experience of individual colours. At the second stratum, two or more colours are taken in simultaneously, so that lines and shapes appear, creating basic forms.

Exploration of the effects potential to our second stratum leads readily to one conclusion, namely, that even at this level, the aesthetic resources exploitable through form are vastly richer than those potential to material alone. We now have color, line, shape, size, and movement as “means” to employ in creating beauty. The “ends” to which we can employ them are almost infinite in variety and often lofty in potential effect, including all the resources of harmony, contrast, balance, proportion, rhythm, and emphasis, in so far as these can be developed in abstract forms upon a flat field. [32]

But to Abell, such abstract forms and patterns have their limitations:

Visually at least, the mind appears to be a representational instrument. However much, at certain moments, it may delight in abstract form, it cannot long subsist on the rarefied atmosphere of abstraction. [39]

So, Abell moves on to his third level, at which light, distance, volume, and texture add further complexity to form. Here he finds that the art of the cubists and their non-objective successors may possess formal beauty. But, they cannot approach the

“orchestrations” of Titian, El Greco, Renoir, and Cézanne, where third-level elements “afford a richness and subtlety of perceptive experience, a massiveness of formal impact, not to be derived from these abstract creations” [48]. Now it becomes clear that the artist needs the stimulus of the environment.

As Professor Dewey has convincingly shown, experience arises only from an interaction between *two* factors, of which the mind constitutes but one: a sensitive agent and its environment.⁸⁵ Now the environment of human sensitivity is the natural universe in which it lives and by which it is itself continually in the process of being moulded. To exclude that universe from art is to disqualify for artistic uses all but a minor and artificially segregated aspect of the artist’s experience. It is accordingly to deprive him of his chief sources both of material and of creative stimulus. Under such conditions, it is but natural that his work should prove difficult and that his product should be limited in the range of its effects. [49]

And on to the fourth and highest level, in which representation goes beyond the enrichment of plastic form to develop “subject-matter in its own right” [62]. At this level Abell sees infinitely varied images of recognizable objects that

stimulate a new range of associations, evoking the residuum of experience gained through contact with such objects in life. It is this new deposit of associations which constitutes our fourth stratum. [62–3]

To have aesthetic value, subject matter must become one with form and remain subordinate to it. Then, one arrives at “representational form,” his central concept.

Form, the organizing force which gives all elements their respective places in a governing network of relations; form which we have watched progressively extending its domain from the rudimentary ordering of points in a line or lines in a rectangle to the heroic conquest of a whole plastic world in a Cézanne landscape; form which, like a vessel flooded by successive waves, has no sooner been immersed in new aspects of experience than it begins to rise through them and eventually emerges once more at the top – form now begins its organizing work upon the expressive elements injected into it by representation and once again may end, not only by maintaining its sovereignty but by extending that sovereignty over new domains. [71–2]

* Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1934), especially pages 13–17. Graham McInnes made this idea central to his criticism.

G. Campbell (Graham) McInnes, "New Horizons in Canadian Art," 1937*

Charles Hill has pointed out that McInnes was the first Toronto art writer to promote the newer Montreal painters, including Alexandre Bercovitch, Fritz Brandtner, and Louis Muhlstock, and that he had a particular interest in artists engaged in social comment.⁶¹ Even in the pro-business paper Saturday Night, where he had a column, he spoke, however carefully, as the social democrat he was.[†] While he does not refer directly to the Spanish Civil War, McInnes's publication of this article in New Frontier shows the respect he had for the New Frontier's mandate in a deepening world crisis.

I may perhaps be forgiven for misquoting, as a title, the name of an American periodical,[‡] for in its own way the new movement in Canadian art is as important to us as their own movement is to our friends south of the border. The leaven which has been slowly working in the contemporary field has recently begun to have a noticeable effect, and the tenth annual exhibition of the Canadian Society of Painters in Water Color, and more especially, the exhibition of the Canadian Society of Graphic Art, held last month in the Art Gallery of Toronto, were showings whose quality was in general dictated by this new movement, and whose outstanding excellence was largely due to it. The position may be briefly, if imperfectly, summed up by stating that the dominant feature of these exhibitions was an interest in people rather than in things, and, secondarily, the development of a social consciousness among our artists.

To understand the significance of this, a brief glance at the history of Canadian art is necessary. Up to the turn of the century, Canadian art was, broadly speaking, non-existent.[§] This was due partly to the pressure of pioneering work, partly to a lack of national consciousness, and more particularly to the fact that what artists there were worked in the currently fashionable European tradition. True, engineers and military men made valuable documentary records, Kane and Krieghoff recorded Indian and habitant life; but the bulk of artists were content with neo-Barbizon landscapes, neo-Dutch genre pieces, and the founding of societies to perpetuate these empty imitations in a rigid hierarchy. It is tragic to

* G. Campbell (Graham) McInnes, "New Horizons in Canadian Art," *New Frontier* 2, no. 2 (June 1937): 19–20. By permission of Simon McInnes.

† However, as Kirk Niergarth has shown, when McInnes wrote in *Saturday Night* about the artists he featured in "New Horizons" he remained vague about the content of their work, and this had the effect of depoliticizing it ("The Dignity of Every Human Being," 62–3).

‡ Actually, it was a catalogue, *New Horizons in American Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), from an exhibition which summed up the first year of work produced under the Federal Art Project of Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration.

§ McInnes adds a footnote: "For the purposes of this discussion, I deliberately omit references to the totemic art of the West Coast Indians, and the ecclesiastical and domestic architecture and woodcarving of the French Canadian School."



Fig. 4.15

Carl Schaefer, *Self-Portrait at Hanover*, 23 April 1939. Watercolour over graphite on wove paper, 38 × 29 cm. Purchased 1992. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, accession no. 36758. Photo: NGC.

realize that so young a country as Canada already has its own Royal Academy, where mediocre practitioners, secure in the possession of three magic letters, regularly present us with their sterile little universe, boxed, taped, wrapped in cellophane and provided with a little price-tag, and atrophy the creative spirit.

That, however, is by the way. For no art institution can stem the true creative impulse, and by 1910 the influence of Impressionism and to some extent, Post Impressionism (though it was not yet called that) had begun to be felt. Morrice, Cullen, and in his own way Homer Watson, were experimenting with new colors and techniques, discovering the snowscape, and painting work which for almost the first time looked as if it could have been painted nowhere else but in Canada. To state that work is recognisably Canadian is not to insist on its goodness; but it remains true that until artists react to their own immediate environment, their work, no matter how well it be executed, has an inherent falsity.

Then, along with the great war, came the Group of Seven. Irrespective of what one thinks of their work (and personally I greatly admire much of it, despite a somewhat obvious poetic-romantic approach) one has to credit the Group with tenacity, sincerity and courage, and these tremendous facts: that they discovered the Canadian landscape for their contemporaries, completely changed the course of Canadian art, and laid the foundations on which the young men of today are building. What happened afterwards was not their fault. Any student of the history of art knows that when a vital and original school comes into existence, there follows in its train a shoal of disciples who imitate its outward forms, without its inner creative fire. That Canadian art swung too far in the direction of pure landscape, that during the twenties there appeared all over the Dominion people who painted innumerable rocks, trees and lakes, should not blind us to the achievement of the Group. And it is to their eternal credit that when they saw what was happening, they disbanded themselves, in 1933.

But their imitators had done their fell work. Visitors to our art galleries would have imagined that Canada was denuded of people, and that its landscape consisted only of the Pre-Cambrian Shield. These people, painting north of lat. 45° and beyond, forgot the eleven million Canadians living, working and creating to the south. There is nothing wrong with painting rocks, lakes and trees. The artist should paint what inner compulsion makes him feel he should paint. The trouble was that this annual trek north had become a fashion; it was the “done thing” in artistic circles. In this Pre-Cambrian tower there was little real feeling, and as a result, painting was in a fair way to become as false and artificial as the most mannered academicism. To save Canadian art, three things were needed: artists who felt for the new Canada that is the work of millions of active people and thousands of indefinable cross currents and feelings and desires – a new set of media to work in – and some event which might shake the lat. 45° painters from their complacency, and make them question their narrow and repetitive

standards. There could be little doubt that in a young, vital country these would be found.

About a decade ago a group of young artists in Montreal, and one or two solitary workers in Winnipeg and Vancouver, began to depict and interpret what they saw about them. Montreal is a great city and a Canadian city, and these painters, characteristically, both French and English, were enthralled by what they saw. While the majority of painters were religiously hiking north, they looked out of their back windows and saw two things: an immediate, interesting activity of people, and significant formal relationships. These they fused into creative ideas which they externalised on canvas. At the same time, in and around Toronto, a small group began painting the new Canadian landscape – the land as it looks after Canadians have tilled it, lived by it and died in it – the land which has left its mark on a people and has in turn been marked by them.

Concurrent with this new activity, there was a slight, but definite movement away from oils toward water color and the various graphic media. It was realised that oils offered too easy results, put a premium on the amateur and the dilettante, encouraged the large canvas, the imposing easel picture. The new media demanded complete mastery as a means to expression, but once mastered, enabled the artist to express himself with vigor, immediacy and powerful concentration. Following on this, came a renewed and more realist interest in mural painting.

Finally, there was the depression. The broadening of the contemporary arena, the added complexity of life, the pressure of world events, all pointed overwhelmingly to the truth that the very great artist, while he transcends his age, must at the same time be inescapably part of it. It was hard to do this north of lat. 45°.

These three causes combined to turn Canadian art in a new direction – a direction manifest in the exhibitions of which I have already spoken. This new direction expresses itself in a vivid interest in contemporary life in all its moods, set down with technical mastery in an essentially Canadian manner, and above all, in a manner disciplined by the rigid requirements of the visual arts. This latter point is important, for to seek out contemporary life, when it is not felt through aesthetic means, to become socially conscious in an aggressive and literary manner may be fine propaganda, but is almost certain to be poor art. In fact, in the last resort, it is not even good propaganda, for the best propaganda is that which is expressed, with technical excellence and honesty, through essentially artistic means – truth to material, selection and suppression, emphasis and synthesis, an appreciation of form, and a depth and sincerity of aesthetic emotion.

In these two showings, certain artists have accomplished this task, and others are on the way to accomplishing it, and in doing so they point out the path along which Canadian art is most likely to develop, and most fruitfully, within the next few years. I am not going to go through these exhibitions name by name for

without illustrative material that would be a pointless task. But for those interested in spotting young talent, and in the development of Canadian art, I nominate for the hall of fame in the vanguard of this new movement Nathan Petroff, Lillian Freiman, Laurence Hyde, Paraskeva Clark, Pegi Nicol and Carl Schaefer, of Toronto; Louis Muhlstock and Fritz Brandtner of Montreal; Miller Brittain of St. John and Smith of Hamilton. Already discernible among the rank and file is another group which includes Samuel Reindorf, Caven Atkins, Rody Courtice, Conyers Barker and Gordon Webber of Toronto; Paul Goranson of Vancouver, Leonard Hutchinson of Hamilton, and Ian MacIver of New York. Not all these artists are of the front rank; some of them are not of the second, but those that are not have youth, enthusiasm and sincerity, which is worth a great deal. When one considers that there are also quite a number of artists who did not exhibit here, yet who are working along similar lines,* I think one is justified in saying that this new movement, though still in embryo, has definitely begun to gather way, and to influence contemporary Canadian art. Ten years may prove me a false prophet; but today there is no denying the strength and vitality of this young art.

Norman Bethune, from “An Apology for Not Writing Letters,” 1936†

In a Madrid under fire, Bethune typed this letter “to my friends in Canada,” with the words “New Frontier” at the top of the first page; perhaps he thought of publishing it in the magazine. A copy of his letter was kept by Marian Scott, who would cite it fifty years later.⁶²

I have included all of the letter except for an opening section about why he had been out of touch.

Only by a shared physical experience – tactile, visual or auditory – may an approximately similar emotion be felt by two people without the aid of art. Only through art, can the truth of a non-shared experience be transmitted. To share with you what I have seen, what I have experienced in the past six months, is impossible without art. Without art, experience becomes, on the one hand, the denuded, bare bones of fact – a static, still-life – the how-many-ness of things; or, on the other hand, the swollen, exaggerated shapes of fantastically-coloured romanticism. And I will do neither. I refuse to write either way. Both are false – the first by its poverty, the second by its excess.

* McInnes’s footnote: “Such as Aleksandre Bercovitch, Samuel Borenstein, James Beckwith and Marc-Aurèle Fortin of Montreal; Andre Bieler of Kingston; Jori Smith of Baie St. Paul, P.Q.; Orville Fisher of Vancouver – to name only a few.”

† Norman Bethune, from “An Apology for Not Writing Letters,” Spain, 5 May 1936; copy in volume 14, file 24, Marian Scott Fonds.



Fig. 4.16

Norman Bethune, photograph, 1937. Inscribed "to Paraskeva from Norman, Madrid 1.6.37." Paraskeva and Philip T. Clark fonds, e006580511, Library and Archives Canada.

So I despair of my ability to transpose the reality of experience into the reality of the written word. Art should be the legitimate and recognizable child of experience. I am afraid of a changeling. I am afraid it would have none of the unmistakable, inherited characteristics of its original, true, parental reality.

I can not write you, my friends, because this art of letters is a second, a repeated form of action. And one form of action at a time is enough. I can not do both – but successively, with an interval of a year, or ten years. Perhaps I can do both. I don't know. I don't think it matters very much.

I think that art has no excuse, no reason for existence except through the re-creation – by a dialectical process – of a new form of reality, for the old experience – transmitted through a man's sensorium – changed and illuminated by his conscious and unconscious mind. Exact reproduction is useless – that way lies death. The process of change from the old to the new is not a flat circular movement – a turn and return on itself, but helical and ascending.

The process of creative art is the negation of the negation. First there is the change, that is, the negation, of the original, the positive reality; then the second change (or negation), which is a re-affirmation, a re-birth, through art, of the original experience, to the new positive, the new form of reality.

Let us take an example from painting – a moving object such as a tree swaying in the wind, a child at play, a bird in flight – any form of action, seen and perceived. This is the positive, the thesis. Reduced from the dynamic positive in time and space to a static form, by representation, (in this case, by paint on canvas) it becomes the negation of action, the denial of action. This is the antithesis. Then by the miracle of creative art, this static thing, (of necessity static, owing, to the medium employed) is vivified, transformed into movement again, into life again, but into a new life, becomes positive again, becomes the negation of the negation, the synthesis – the union of life and death, of action and non-action, the emergence of the new from the old, but retaining the old within the new.

Now the same thing applies to the literary art, the plastic arts, music, the dance or what not – any art form. And unless that fresh emergent form, with its core of the old, is a new thing, a dynamic thing, a quick and living thing, it is not art. It arouses no response except intellectual appreciation, the facile response to familiar, recognizable objects, or admiration for technical skill.

And because I can't write you, my friends, as I should like to write you, because my words are poor, anaemic and hobbling things, I have not written. Yes, I could write, but I am ashamed to write – like this: –

“We were heavily shelled today. It was very uncomfortable. Fifty people were killed in the streets. The weather is lovely now although the winter has been hard. I am well. I think of you often. Yes, it is true I love you. Good bye.”

I put them down and look at these words with horror and disgust. I wish I could describe to you how much I dislike these words. “Uncomfortable” – good god! what a word to describe the paralyzing fear that seizes one when a shell bursts with a great roar and crash near by; “killed,” for those poor huddled bodies of rags and blood, lying in such strange shapes, face down on the cobblestones, or with sightless eyes upturned to a cruel and indifferent sky; “lovely” when the sun falls on our numbed faces like a benediction; “well” when to be alive is well enough; “think” for that cry rising from our hearts day by day for remembered ones; “love” for this ache of separation.

So you see, it's no good.

Forgive me if I talk more about art. It must seem to you that I know either a great deal about it or nothing at all. I really know very little about it. I think it is very mysterious, very strange. But it seems to me to be a natural product of the subconscious mind of man, of all men, in some degree. Arising into the realm of deliberate thought, its life is imperiled. A theory of art reminds me of a medieval chart of the then-known world – curious, fantastic and wonderfully untrue. A theory of art is an attempt of the rational mind to impose its discipline and its

order on the seeming chaos and seeming disorder of the emotional subconscious. If this is attempted – and it has frequently been attempted, a certain form of art, ordered and neat, arises. By its subjection to the conscious mind, to the deliberate directional thought of the artist and his theory, it lives for a while and then languishes and dies. It can not survive its separation from the great breeding ground of the unconscious. The mind (that alien in the attic) by its dictatorship, destroys the very thing it has discovered.

Most great artists of the world have been – thank Heaven – “stupid” in the worldly sense. They didn’t think too much, they simply painted. Driven on by an irresistible internal compulsion, they painted as they did, as they must paint.

A great artist lets himself go. He is natural. He “swims easily in the stream of his own temperament.” He listens to himself. He respects himself. He has a deeper fund of strength to draw from than that arising from rational and logical knowledge. Yet how beautifully the dialectical process comes in again, – modified by thought, his primitive unconsciousness, conditioned by experience, reacts to reality and produces new forms of that reality. These particular forms of art arise, satisfy for their time, decay and die. But, by their appearance, they modify and influence succeeding art forms. They also modify and influence the very reality which produced them. Art itself never dies. Art itself is a great ever blooming tree, time-less, indestructible and immortal. The particular art forms of a generation are the flowers of that immortal tree. They are the expressions of their particular time but they are the products also of all the preceding time.

The artist needs, among other things, leisure, immense quietness, privacy and aloneness. The environment in which he has his being, are those dark, sunless, yet strangely illuminated depths of the world’s subconscious, – the warm, pulsating yet quiet depths of the other-world.

He comes up into the light of every-day, like a great leviathan of the deep, breaking the smooth surface of accepted things, gay, serious, sportive and destructive. In the bright banal glare of day, he enjoys the purification of violence, the catharsis of action. His appetite for life is enormous. He enters eagerly into the life of man, of all men. He becomes all men in himself. He views the world with an all-embracing eye which looks upwards, outwards, inwards and downwards, – understanding, critical, tender and severe. Then he plunges back once more, back into the depths of that other-world, – strange, mysterious, secret and alone. And there, in those depths, he gives birth to the children of his being – new forms, new colours, new sounds, new movements, reminiscent of the known, yet not the known; alike and yet unlike; strange yet familiar; calm, profound and sure.

The function of the artist is to disturb. His duty is to arouse the sleeper, to shake the complacent pillars of the world. He reminds the world of its dark ancestry, shows the world its present, and points the way to its new birth. He is

at once the product and the preceptor of his time. After his passage we are troubled and made unsure of our too-easily accepted realities. He makes uneasy the static, the set and the still. In a world terrified of change, he preaches revolution – the principle of life. He is an agitator, a disturber of the piece – quick, impatient, positive, restless and disquieting. He is the creative spirit of life working in the soul of man.

But enough. Perhaps the true reason I can not write is that I'm too tired – another 150 miles on the road today, and what roads!

Our first job is to defeat fascism – the enemy of the creative artist. After that we can write about it.

Good bye. I do think of you with love and affection. Forgive me when I do not write.

Salud

Norman Bethune

Madrid, May 5, 1937.

Defending *Art vivant* in Montreal

In art, it is the maximum of uniqueness, of individualism that secures the maximum of universality [...] And this is finally what condemns mercilessly all academicism, all nationalism in art, in the name not only of the laws of art but also of human truth.

Marie-Alain Couturier, O.P., 1944

Canada declared war on Germany in September 1939, totally unprepared; but within a few months the first troops had shipped out of Halifax harbour. By the next summer Canadian war industries were in high-speed production; they would send more than 815,000 war vehicles to Europe before the war's end, as well as massive quantities of munitions.¹ Wage, price, and employment controls and the rationing of certain commodities went into effect.

Some young French Canadians, vulnerable to conscription into an overwhelmingly anglophone military force, argued in the early days of the war that Canada should have stayed clear and that French Canadians, having inhabited the land for a full three centuries, would never have dragged the country into a deadly war over Europe's quarrels. Although Quebec's wartime Liberal government and many francophone citizens supported the war effort,² and although a hundred thousand French Canadians would eventually volunteer for service, anti-participation views were shared by many at the war's beginning.³ After all, the United States hadn't gone to war yet. It is understandable then that in Montreal, two-thirds French Canadian, artists were not thronging to Ottawa's war effort as English Canadian artists would do. Hélène Sicotte observed that the whole question of war art also seemed to be absent from francophone criticism.⁴

But these artists were never attracted by the post-First World War project of a national art as announced by the Group of Seven and expanded by the Canadian Group of Painters, and their political involvements as well as their engagements with art took very different lines during the war. In this narrative, I summarize the amazing development of art in wartime Montreal, a story familiar to scholars of Canadian art history but not told before in quite this way, with the important writings seen against the broader context of wartime Quebec and its international connections.

As the war began, conservative artists still dominated the annual Spring Exhibitions of the Art Association of Montreal, which had long been the centre of art

exhibitions and classes for English Canadian Montrealers.^{5*} The central body for obtaining professional artistic credentials in Montreal was the École des Beaux-Arts, a traditional European-style school where students drew from plaster casts of Greek and Roman sculpture in the French academy tradition. The director Charles Maillard was an especially rigid French academy artist, and the history of art as taught there seemed to end in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The opposite was *art vivant*, “living art,” based on French art from Cézanne to Picasso – and the term *art vivant* rather than “modern” was the one used most often in francophone Montreal. The liberal critic Henri Girard had described, in the article on Fritz Brandtner included in the previous chapter, the difference between *art vivant* and academic art: “Now art, when it is living art, knows neither stability nor well defined principles. When it stands still, when it obeys formulas, that is decadence.”⁶

More and more voices were speaking for *art vivant*. Artist-critic John Lyman had fiercely defended it in English-language journals since returning from France in 1931. The journalist-novelist Jean-Charles Harvey had published in 1937 a powerful essay, “In Literature, in Art, to Be Free or Not to Be,” in which he declared that his fight for liberal democracy was a fight above all for freedom of expression in Quebec, where the conservative political-clerical alliance had long dominated the culture. Harvey remarked elsewhere that year that the number of his compatriots who “think, reflect, travel, and refine themselves in contact with life” was growing yearly, and that a writer could begin to hope for an air less charged with menace and fear.⁷ Strengthening the presence of *art vivant* became a way of promoting free thought.

A well-known part of this new pattern had been the banding together in 1939 of Montreal’s modern artists and their supporters, francophone and anglophone, in the Contemporary Arts Society, conceived by John Lyman and founded jointly by him, the artist-teacher Paul-Émile Borduas, and Borduas’s friend Robert Élie, a university student, budding writer, and close friend of the modernist poet Saint-Denys Garneau. The Contemporary Arts Society, open to all professional artists and supporters who were “neither associated with, nor partial to, any Academy,”⁸ arranged the remarkable “Art of Our Day” exhibition in 1939, which included works by Wassily Kandinsky, Franz Marc, Diego Rivera, and other international artists – all from Montreal collections. “Was such a thing possible?” asked John Lyman. “Most people would have said ‘no,’ and until recently they would have

* The artist-critic John Lyman said of the 1939 Spring Exhibition, when the jury was divided between conservatives and progressives, that “for the first time it begins to reflect contemporary Canadian art as it is, for better or for worse. But it is still a concession. It is still qualified by the benevolent toleration of ‘experimental’ work” (“More on the Spring Annual,” *Montrealer*, 1 April 1939, 28). But then the show again “slumped away from progress or any constructive purpose” (“The American Show, The Spring Exhibition,” *Montrealer*, 1 April 1940, 25). In 1943 and 1944, the Spring Exhibition, boycotted by the Contemporary Arts Society, had a purely academic jury (Varley, *The Contemporary Arts Society*, 14).

been right. Yet here it is.”⁹ And Robert Ayre commented that “it must be a terrific shock to the guardians to learn that Montreal, for so many generations the last Elysian pasture for sacred Dutch cows, should have let down the bars to admit strange Blue Horsemen.”¹⁰

By the beginning of the war, the ruptures with old conservative values were growing more and more obvious, and many broader cultural factors were at play. More than 85 per cent of Montreal homes had radios by 1941.¹¹ The city had tripled in size to a million people since the last war, and now industry grew vastly as tremendous numbers of tanks and other war equipment went from its factories to its great seaport and on to Europe. On the social side, Ottawa, having assumed much power from the provinces in order to centralize the war effort, instituted unemployment insurance and a family allowance program, and Quebec’s wartime Liberal government granted women the vote (long after the other provinces). The Church’s old guard still had control of Quebec’s schools, especially the *collèges classiques*, elite schools for young French Canadian men headed for the professions, but students all over Montreal were exploring alternative views. In fact, at the Université de Montréal, the rector complained that although the university was Catholic, many students and faculty failed to practise Catholicism visibly.¹²

Among Montreal’s intellectuals there were growing numbers of *chrétiens de gauche*, liberal Catholics who were expressing their discontent with the narrow authoritarian attitudes of official Quebec Catholicism. In addition, many French intellectuals who had fled the war had made Montreal their temporary home. Montreal’s publishing industry became a great temporary harbour for French thought when a special copyright arrangement was made to reprint and distribute out-of-print French titles, and more than 21 million books were printed in Quebec between 1940 and 1947.¹³ The publisher Bernard Valiquette remarked that with the presence of these books “the public is more demanding and the writers will surely become more audacious.”¹⁴ Also, a great deal of art that had been sent over for safekeeping could be seen in Montreal. In 1943, for instance, thirty Van Goghs and a Mondrian appeared at the Art Association of Montreal in the *Loan Exhibition of Five Centuries of Dutch Art*. The liberal newspaper *Le Jour* had commented the previous year that Montreal was more than ever a centre for intellectual research and activity, with lectures, theatre, music, opera, and ever more numerous art exhibitions.¹⁵ Artist Fernand Leduc, then a Beaux-Arts student, spoke later of the “effervescence totale” of that moment.¹⁶

There was an international political reality behind the growing loyalty to *art vivant*. French Canadians had two perspectives on France. Modern artists and many other young people looked to the “living,” creative France that, during the Nazi occupation, existed mostly in art and books and minds scattered across the continents by the war. In contrast, many of the old French Canadian elite, with its families tied to a xenophobically nationalist clergy, looked back to “la France profonde,” a

Fig. 5.1

Paul-Émile Borduas, *Maurice Gagnon*, 1937. Oil on canvas, 50.2 × 44.8 cm. Purchased 1969. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, accession no. 15794. Photo: NGC.

This portrait of Borduas's colleague and friend at the École du Meuble comes from the year Borduas started teaching there, which was also the year Gagnon wrote the first article ever published about the painter (Gagnon, "Paul-Émile Borduas, peintre montréalais," 10–11).



pre-revolutionary, pre-romantic Catholic France,¹⁷ and this old elite found reassuring echoes of that France in the authoritarianism of the collaborationist Vichy government of the occupation.

The École du Meuble, which stood at the edge of Montreal's Latin Quarter near the École des Beaux-Arts, was about to develop into a centre for *art vivant*, and for the effervescence of which Leduc spoke. When the war started, Paul-Émile Borduas was teaching there, as were his Paris-trained friends Maurice Gagnon, the school's art historian and librarian, and the architect Marcel Parizeau, both *chrétiens de gauche* like Borduas. The school was part of the Quebec government's Depression-era initiative to promote French Canadian artisanal work, and it aimed "not only to produce honest artisans, but to awaken in these students the desire for personal creation."¹⁸ Borduas's job there was to teach design and formal skills to complement the technical training of other teachers, including the director Jean-Marie Gauvreau, a cabinetmaking expert and author of *Artisans du Québec*. Borduas had a certain knowledge of Quebec artisanal production, since he and Maurice Gagnon travelled in rural Quebec in the summer of 1938 as researchers



Fig. 5.2

Marcel Parizeau. Frontispiece, M.-A. Couturier, *Marcel Parizeau, architecte* (Montreal: L'Arbre 1945). Image courtesy of Toronto Public Library.

The artist André Biéler described Marcel Parizeau as “a very, very fine chap, very great perception. At the École du meuble, he created an atmosphere there that enabled all that group to express themselves” (Biéler, interview by Charles Hill, 18 September 1973). Parizeau designed the 1941 annex to the École du Meuble building on Berri Street, to which the school moved in 1942 after its original building burned. He also collaborated with Paul-Émile Borduas on the design of the Borduas family house at Saint-Hilaire in 1943. At the École du Meuble he ran the department of interior decoration and taught theory (Parizeau’s work at the École du Meuble is described by Lesser, *École du Meuble*, 25–31). His writings are important to the wartime history of *art vivant*.

for a provincial inventory of such objects, a project which fit well with Borduas’s early apprenticeship in church decoration.

Both Borduas and his early mentor Ozias Leduc were featured, together with the French symbolist artist Maurice Denis and others, in a chapter on religious art in Maurice Gagnon’s 1940 book *Peinture moderne*. When Gagnon published it Borduas was just going beyond his early symbolist style, indebted to both Denis and Leduc. Gagnon pictured Borduas as the promising heir in religious art to the two of them: Borduas’s *Saint John* had both “male vigour and profound mystical intensity,” the saint’s humanity being “permeated with asceticism, made divine from within.”¹⁹ Although Borduas would take a radically different direction, his apprenticeship to Ozias Leduc did remain important for its basis in the turn-of-the-century European symbolist movement, which preceded surrealism in its emphasis on dream and poetic images. Borduas said of Leduc, “I owe him for giving me permission to leave the spiritual and pictorial atmosphere of the Renaissance for the power of the dream, that draws one toward the future.”²⁰



In March 1940, there arrived in Montreal from New York a transformative visitor, Marie-Alain Couturier, Dominican priest, religious artist, writer, graduate of the Ateliers d’Art Sacré, and co-editor of the Paris periodical *L’Art Sacré*. Couturier had lived among modern artists in Paris before entering the Dominican order, and

he believed that *art vivant* was necessary to the spiritual health of a more or less officially Christian culture like Quebec's. To Couturier, the "mediocrity and artistic stupidity" of the statues, windows, and other decorations he saw Quebec's curés buying for their churches reflected a "secret decadence" in the culture, since "art is always tied to a certain state of civilization."²¹ "For in order to have Christian art in a country, that country must first have an *art vivant*, and accept all the freedom and risks it brings."²² Borduas warned him that the École des Beaux-Arts, where Couturier was scheduled to lecture, would discourage students from hearing that kind of talk.²³ It did, and twenty-five of the thirty students enrolled to hear Couturier left. However, five stayed out of "a curiosity that became more and more attentive and passionate," as one remembered.²⁴ Pierre Gauvreau took his younger brother Claude and their friend Bruno Cormier, both still in a nearby *collège classique*, to hear Couturier. "Révélation," commented Claude Gauvreau later.²⁵ To Couturier, the "secret drama" of an artist's life was that art required "an effort of pure intuition, a total abandonment to a certain undefined sense of the absolute, and, to be frank, a total risk"; the artist stands "a complete stranger to the stable order of the certitudes that control all other human activity."²⁶ There is much of the romantic in that statement – but it was prescient in regard to what these young people would do later in the decade.

In spring 1940, just as Father Couturier was leaving Montreal for New York, the Quebec painter Alfred Pellán sailed home, escaping the Nazi invasion of Paris and giving up a productive expatriate career. To Montreal's modern art community he was a hero who had made it in Paris, and his paintings brought home reflections of the work of Miró, Masson, Picasso, Klee, Ernst, Matisse. He had a triumphant solo exhibition in the city of Quebec immediately upon arriving, and another at the Art Association of Montreal that fall. Robert Ayre found his show "something of a sensation" and said Pellán's abstracts "begin in the disorder of the world, their color is hot and startling, they are like explosions whose flat fragments, whipped around with bold outlines, are caught as they fly and held in a rigid pattern by a powerful hand. Pellán springs from the violence of Europe."²⁷ Marcel Parizeau noted that it was the first time the two hosting institutions honoured such an artist the way they honoured artists acceptable to good society. "Pellán reminds French Canadians that they can do something."²⁸ A rave review came from Jacques de Tonnancour, art critic for the intrepid Université de Montréal student newspaper *Quartier Latin* and a recent deserter of the École des Beaux-Arts. He announced in "Views from the Promised Land" that "a man who does such violence to all indecision, complacency, and conformity can't help but outrage. A scandal here is hope." Evidently to help educate a new public, de Tonnancour went on to explain in the language of early modernist criticism the importance of form over subject in Pellán's work. The *Quartier Latin* also published a tribute to Pellán by École du Meuble student Julien Hébert. This piece could hardly be a clearer or more powerful statement of France's importance as the centre of *art vivant* and of the responsibility to accept the chal-



Fig. 5.3

"Fled Paris with 500 Paintings," *Montreal Standard*, 5 October 1940. Image courtesy of Janice Anderson, Canadian Women Artists History Initiative.

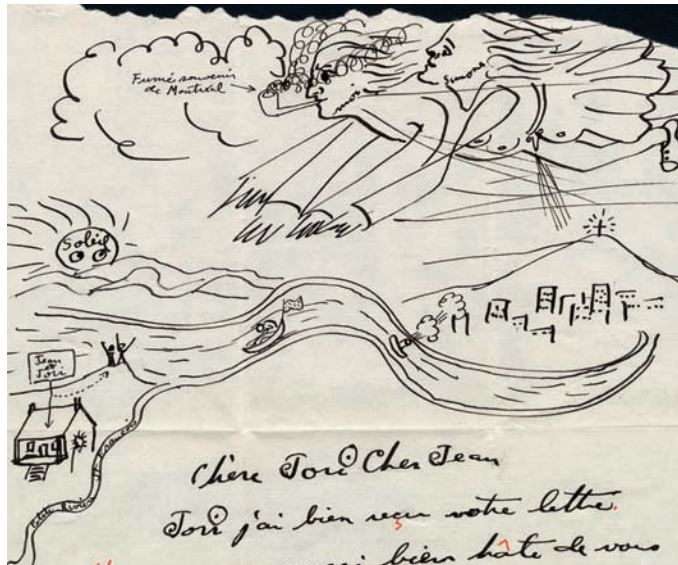


Fig. 5.4 Alfred Pellán, drawing in a letter to Jori Smith and Jean Palardy, 1941. © Estate of Alfred Pellán/SODRAC (2016). Jori Smith fonds, e011074181, Library and Archives Canada.

Pellán stayed with the artists Jori Smith and Jean Palardy in Charlevoix County for a month on returning from Europe, and again the following summer of 1941. In this drawing, he escapes the smoke of Montreal for their small house at Petite-Rivière Saint-François. That fall he showed his Charlevoix paintings at his Montreal studio (Charles Doyon, "Pellán 1941," *Le Jour*, 3 January 1942).

lenge that Pellán (and Père Couturier and Borduas and Maurice Gagnon) had brought: to "reflect France honestly." Writing like Hébert's helps us to sense something of the charged atmosphere developing around these young artists.

Others wrote eagerly about Pellán's arrival. A former classmate who visited his studio reflected on the intense life of Pellán's world of colour and light, and commented that Pellán's spirit, full of the marvellous and of dream, could not be in greater contrast to the spirit of those around him who were so deformed by false education.²⁹ Illustrations of Pellán's work appeared in Maurice Gagnon's *Peinture moderne*, in which Gagnon had boldly set him as well as Borduas and other Montreal artists beside European painters.³⁰ Gagnon wrote, "Pellán isn't a revolutionary

painter ... What throws people off is that Borduas, Braque, Pellán, Picasso rediscover tradition in their audacity and through their audacity.”³¹

Jacques de Tonnancour in reviewing Gagnon’s *Peinture moderne* wrote that now the public could make up for lost time, and once it has “understood, or caught sight of, the nature of synthetism, fauvism, or cubism, it can connect our painters to the great European movements.”³²



Father Couturier returned to Montreal in December 1940 and this time his professional home was the École du Meuble, where his project was to set up an atelier of religious arts and crafts. There his teaching was more successful.³³ He spent time with Maurice Gagnon, Marcel Parizeau, and the charismatic Borduas, who now had a circle of students around him. He met the artist-critic John Lyman and various members of the Contemporary Arts Society as well as other Montreal artists and intellectuals. He translated and published in the *Revue Dominicaine* a piece that Lyman wrote,³⁴ and participated in a lecture series under the joint auspices of the Contemporary Arts Society and the École du Meuble.³⁵ He published a small book called *Art and Catholicism* for a local audience in which he argued that the authenticity of *art vivant*, the only real art, had to be brought back into the churches so that it could permeate the culture again, and that one way to do it was to replace the vulgar mass-produced decoration filling the churches with honest artisanal production that expressed the natural gifts still alive in the québécois people.³⁶ He knew something had to be done to revive Christianity here; he remarked that he had heard more anticlerical conversations during his few months in Canada than in his entire life in France.³⁷ In fact he concluded elsewhere, again presciently, that given the place the clergy had in Canadian life, things could only end in revolt.³⁸

At one of his talks Couturier met another Paris exile, Dr Henri Laugier, a Sorbonne physiologist with a collection of Picassos who was teaching at the Université de Montréal.³⁹ A friendship began, and in mid-1941, Couturier noted that under Laugier’s influence he began to believe that “the essential religious value” of a work of art is an even more intimate aspect of it than its subject.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, Borduas and his students pored over the Picassos. “Une révélation,” said Fernand Leduc later.⁴¹ And in turn Laugier said, “I found in Montreal a young school of painting that is ardent and constructive, perfectly educated in modern research and bringing their own contribution to it.”⁴²

That spring of 1941 Father Couturier organized for the new municipal gallery in Quebec City the *Exposition des Indépendants*, a smaller version of which went on to Montreal. The eleven painters in the show were all Contemporary Arts Society members: Borduas, Pellán, Lyman, Mary Bouchard, Stanley Cosgrove, Louise Gadbois, Eric Goldberg, Louis Muhlstock, Goodridge Roberts, Jori Smith, and Philip Surrey. To launch this show, Couturier gave a talk and wrote the introduction to the show’s brief catalogue,⁴³ and there he revealed another side of his work.

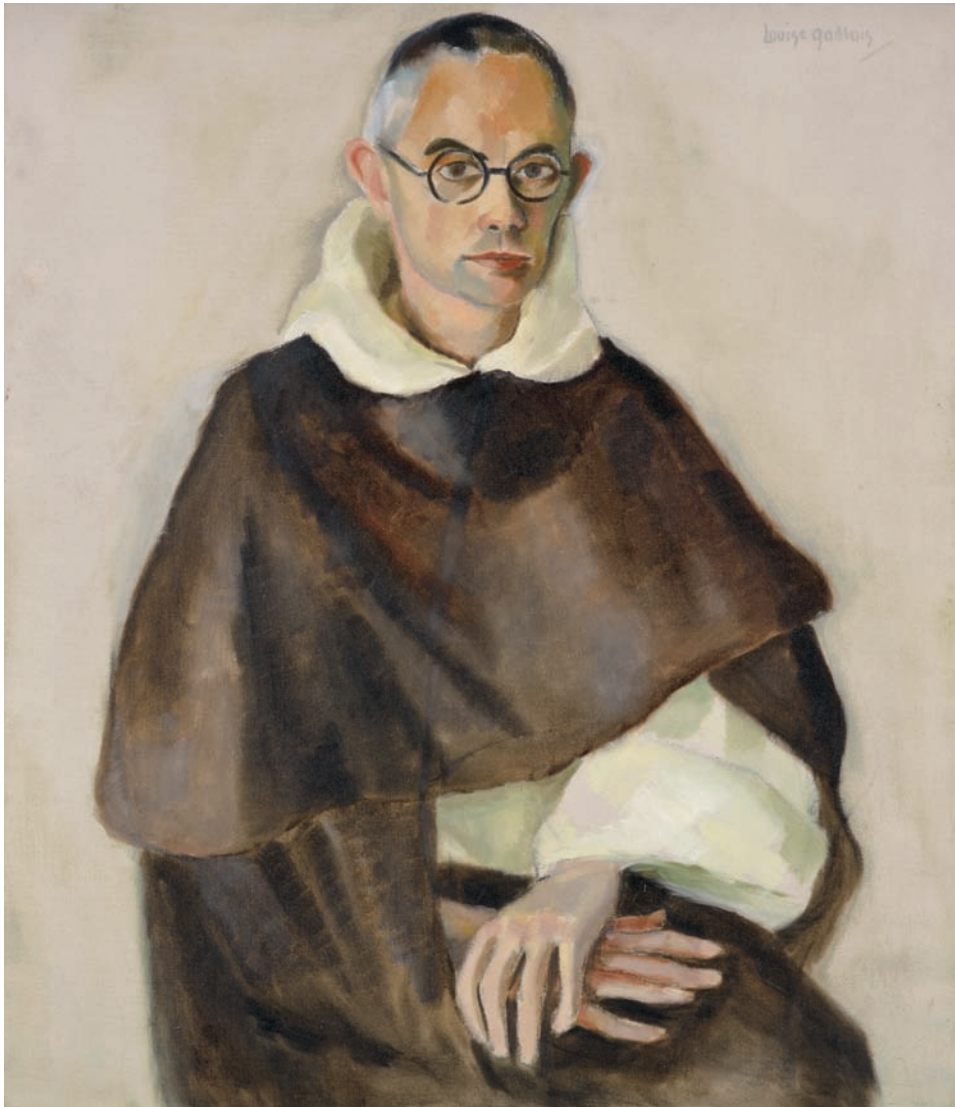


Fig. 5.5

Louise Gadbois, *R.P. Marie-Alain Couturier*, 1941. Oil on canvas, 76.2 × 66 cm. Collection du Musée National des Beaux-Arts du Québec, achat (1967.82). © Succession Louise Gadbois. Crédit photo: MNBAQ, Idra Labrie.

Couturier, like his friend Henri Laugier and many other French wartime exiles, was active in *La France Libre*, Free France, the movement supporting Charles de Gaulle against the Vichy government. This movement's leadership was deeply intent on obtaining the support of French Canada during the war.⁴⁴ Couturier's theme at the exhibition was freedom as usual, but this time his message was directly political: modern art had thrived in Paris because it brought together those who were truly free. "Official" art failed, whether Nazi, fascist of any sort, or Stalinist, because of the "sterility of academic formulas" – because it was not free.⁴⁵ Couturier made it very clear, at this moment when opposition was growing between Quebec's liberal *chrétiens de gauche* and its decadent political-clerical establishment, that supporting *art vivant* was supporting freedom, period.

The *Indépendants* show was very successful, and according to Jacques de Tonancour it had a conclusive effect on its public: "Painting now had the importance

of a religion”; these mostly young people were stripped of their prejudices and “free and independent in their judgments”⁴⁶ like the artists themselves. But Charles Maillard, director of the École des Beaux-Arts de Montreal, took particular offence at the exhibition and at Couturier’s rhetoric. Maillard was no doubt feeling especially threatened because of a recent public suggestion (from the critic Reynald, writing in the *Quartier Latin*) that since French Canadians were no longer spiritual colonials, it was unhealthy policy to leave to French administrators the running of French Canadian institutions, specifically the École des Beaux-Arts.⁴⁷ Charles Maillard published a statement⁴⁸ noting – with certain inaccuracies⁴⁹ – the failure of Couturier’s course at the École des Beaux-Arts, and pointing out that for all their bashing of his institution, some of the *Indépendants* exhibitors were actually its former students. Nine of those exhibitors then published a collective response declaring that the alumni among them had gained from the École des Beaux-Arts only a need for detoxification.⁵⁰ Father Couturier declared in print that the students’ response was the exact truth, and in addition, that the menace to Maillard and his school lay not in Couturier’s own words or acts but in the mediocrity of its painting.⁵¹ It was open war.

Meanwhile, Paul-Émile Borduas was expanding his circle of acquaintances, notably in the fall of 1941, among young students of the École des Beaux-Arts and their friends and siblings – Pierre Gauvreau, Bruno Cormier, Fernand Leduc, Thérèse Renaud, Jeanne Renaud, Louise Renaud, and Françoise Sullivan, some of whom had long been attracted to modern art and culture. Some of these young people in their turn began protesting Maillard’s directorship from within the Beaux-Arts. They got in the habit of visiting Borduas to talk about their work and much else, and as Fernand Leduc remembered it, Borduas’s own thinking and painting grew in the process: “He evolved very rapidly, with his teaching, with the young people; and his problems, he posed them to us, and vice versa.”⁵²

In spring 1942, in a now-famous exhibition of gouache paintings at Montreal’s Foyer de l’Ermitage organized by Maurice Gagnon, Borduas revealed that he had made a great artistic leap. Jacques de Tonnancour recognized at once what is widely understood about these forty-five gouaches: that “in the history of pictorial thought in Canada they are a contribution of the first order.”⁵³ Even the former Group of Seven member Arthur Lismer, who happened to be reviewing Montreal shows for the new magazine *Maritime Art*, called the gouaches “richly emotional and curiously topical.”⁵⁴ Borduas’s gouaches, non-figurative but suggestive of organic forms, were the first major appearance in Canada of automatism, a central technique of the French surrealists for digging up what is in the unconscious.* It was a process familiar to Borduas’s friends at the École du Meuble, where Maurice Gagnon kept the surrealist magazine *Minotaure* in the library (and Gagnon also had a chapter on sur-

* François-Marc Gagnon reminds us that Borduas had in fact painted and exhibited one automatist work, *Abstraction verte*, earlier in the year, though it drew little attention (“Paul-Émile Borduas and the Automatistes,” 145).

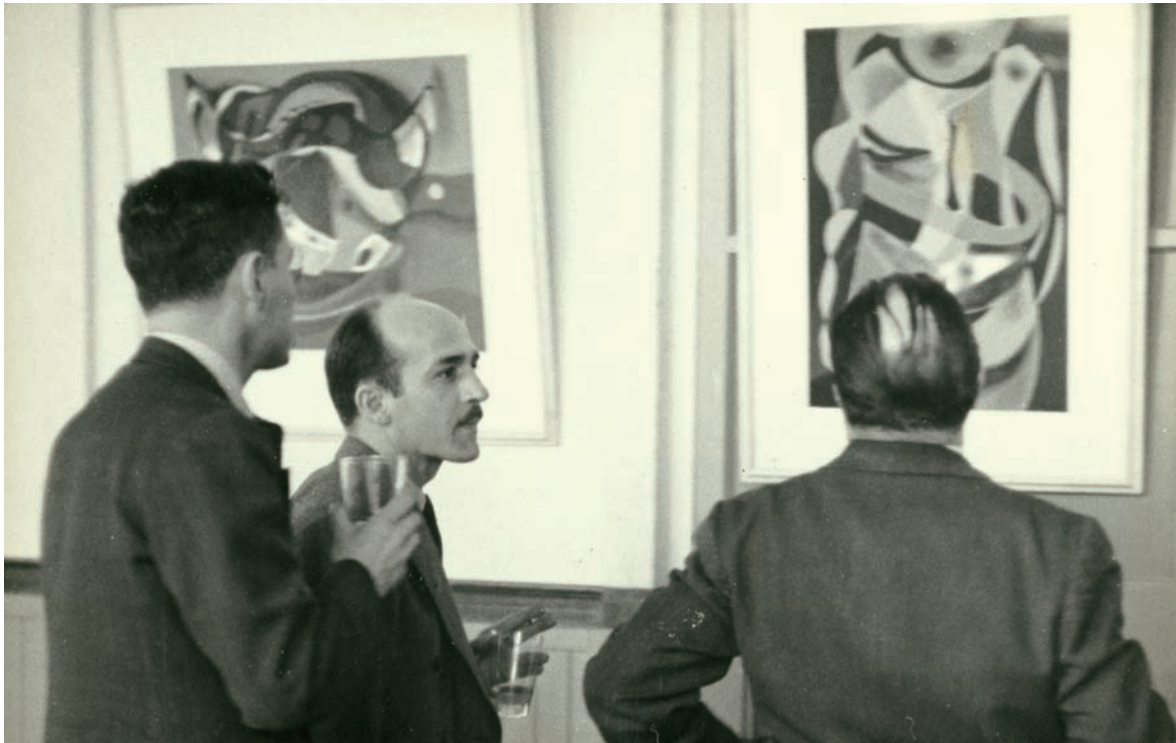
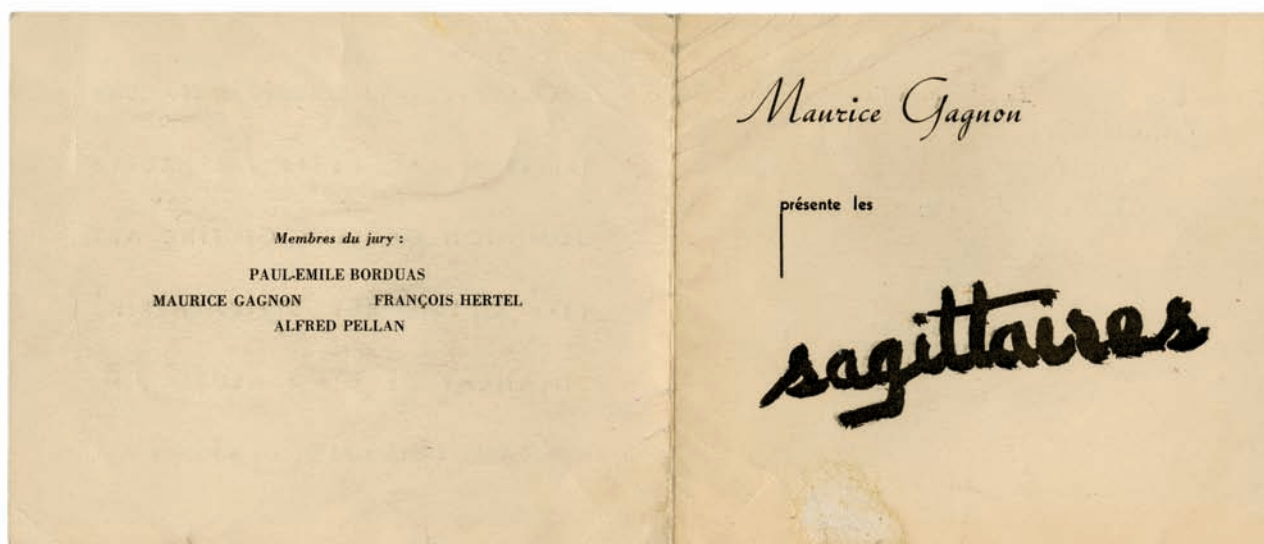


Fig. 5.6

Borduas with the critic Henri Girard at his exhibition of gouaches, Théâtre de l'Ermitage, Montreal, 25 April–2 May 1942. Fonds Paul-Émile Borduas du Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal. Photo: Henri Paul. Image courtesy of MACM.

realism in *Peinture moderne*, where he talked about its engagement with instinct as an attack on the rule of reason).⁵⁵ Automatism, in writing or painting, is the constructing of a work with as little as possible of the preconceived about it. The automatist painter makes marks that bring out other marks, perhaps producing recognizable images and perhaps not. Jacques de Tonnancour wrote of Borduas's gouaches that "the unknown living beauty of the savage state beyond the known, this free and fugitive beauty that we feel going through the core of our being, that dream allows us to glimpse ... This beauty awaited you for a long time, massed against the thin partition separating you from it, now torn."⁵⁶ Robert Élie wrote to praise the "ravishing paintings of Borduas" and to explain automatism to his readers.⁵⁷ Maurice Gagnon, writing of the show, managed to bring in Christianity at the same time that he invoked the surrealist leader André Breton: the gouaches revealed an unexplored territory whose resonances have the "abrupt, austere, magnificent beauty of a universal mystery, of the universe before the Fall." Through a deepened knowledge of man one creates "a surreality that brings thought to its original purity, as André Breton says so well"; Borduas was "purged, as he told me himself, through reading the Bible and the Comte de Lautréamont's *Chants de Maldoror*."⁵⁸



Borduas himself spoke of this new work more in *art vivant* terms, saying that it “must be produced in a continual state of becoming so that the instinct from which follows the song, can be continually expressed in the execution of the work. The song is the vibration transmitted to the material by a human sensibility. This makes the material live. It’s this from which flows all the mystery of a work of art: that inert matter can be brought to life.”⁵⁹ In fact Borduas’s emphasis on inert matter, *la matière*, is quite different from anything Breton said,⁶⁰ and it would become very important to the Automatiste group.

Half a year later Borduas gave a lecture at a Montreal literary and art club, and after much reworking, published it in the new Montreal literary journal *Amérique Française* under the title “Ways of Savouring a Work of Art.”⁶¹ In this well-known essay, an excerpt from which follows, he explains that since relations between art and the visible world had been ended by cubism, only one world remained open for exploration, the unconscious world of the surrealist. Automatism was the royal road to that world, and it could transform society from the inside out by destroying the false and the conventional. This was a very different sort of connection to society than what Walter Abell and Graham McInnes proposed. For them, it was a matter of making art somehow accessible. For the Borduas group, art had to transform and liberate society.



In May 1943 Couturier was back again, and he opened an exhibition of the *Sagittaires* organized by Maurice Gagnon and by Guy Viau, a former École du Meuble student and a loyal friend and admirer of Borduas.⁶² According to Borduas, the *Sagittaires* group formed when students realized that their growing interests had resonances outside the classroom.⁶³ The twenty-three artists in this successful show were all less than thirty years old, and most were students from the École du Meuble and the École des Beaux-Arts. Couturier commented at the opening that their

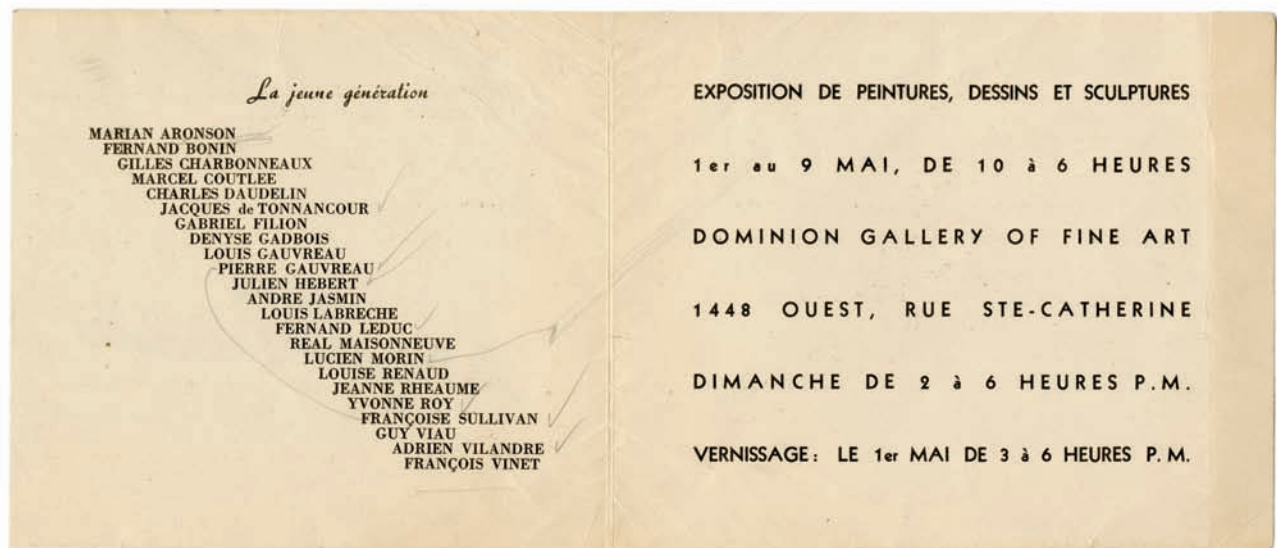


Fig. 5.7a and 5.7b Above

Brochure for the Sagittaires exhibition, Dominion Gallery, Montreal, 1943. Fonds Léon Bellefleur, P898,S2,D6, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec.

Maurice Gagnon, organizer of this show, was adviser to Dr Max Stern, the gallery's proprietor, and steered him toward the circles of both John Lyman and Paul-Émile Borduas.

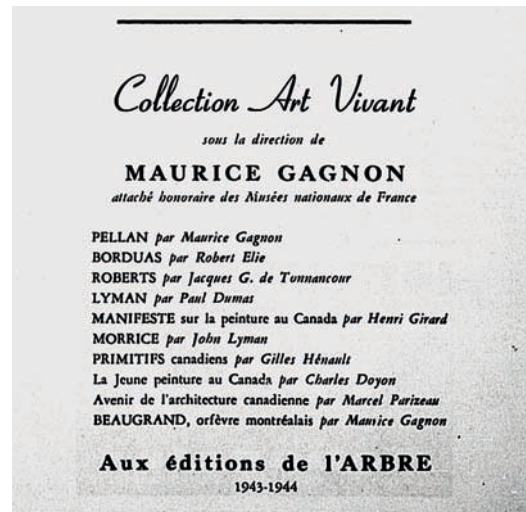
youth was not just a temporal phenomenon but a spiritual force, a gift for candour and freshness as “pure and precious as a diamond,” that must be guarded for a lifetime from the menace surrounding it on all sides. An artist “saves nothing of himself, neither his youth nor the fruits of his experience, if he does not always maintain within himself the demands of an absolute liberty.”⁶⁴

That year, at the École des Beaux-Arts, Charles Maillard evidently decided a new strategy was needed to attract the young. He gave Pellán and Stanley Cosgrove teaching jobs, which to the critic Charles Doyon was merely “a tacit admission of prior insufficiencies. Why temporize, when the evil is at the root?”⁶⁵

In the meantime, Montreal’s modern art community took advantage of the wartime publishing boom. Maurice Gagnon’s *Peinture moderne* appeared in a revised edition from Valiquette. L’Arbre, the new publishing arm of the liberal Catholic literary review *La Relève*, put out – in addition to poetry, novels, anti-fascist tracts for airdrop into France, and a collection Henri Laugier produced for Free France⁶⁶ – the series *Collection art vivant*, directed by Maurice Gagnon. Gagnon wrote that name of the series was not just a name: it signified the victory over academicism of authentic art, introduced to Canada by James Wilson Morrice and continued by the “masters of today: Borduas, Lyman, Pellán, Roberts.”⁶⁷ These four artists, two francophone and two anglophone, would be the subjects of books in the *Collection art vivant*. Gagnon’s own *Pellán* and Robert Élie’s *Borduas*, the first two titles, came out in December 1943.

Fig. 5.8

Advertisement for the Collection Art Vivant on the first page of the special supplement "Peinture canadienne," *Quartier Latin*, 17 December 1943. Image courtesy of Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec.



That same month, the *Quartier Latin* published a special eight-page section, "Peinture Canadienne," expansive and optimistic in spirit like, in some ways, the Université de Montréal itself, a centre of the city's French Canadian intellectual and cultural life since before the war, and recently moved to a new modern campus.⁶⁸ The art editor responsible for the special section was Guy Viau. It was the history of Canadian painting from the Montreal *art vivant* perspective, the perspective of the Contemporary Arts Society and of the Arbre publishing group, which had an ad on the front page. Some of the city's most influential critics – Maurice Gagnon, Marcel Parizeau, Charles Doyon, François Hertel, Paul Dumas – contributed articles, as did thirteen other writers, including the artists Guy Viau, Jacques de Tonnancour, Françoise Sullivan, Jack Humphrey, and Fernand Leduc. Viau's piece was a biographical tribute to James Wilson Morrice, authentic poet, Canadian father of *art vivant*, and the first to "bring back from Paris the freedom to be oneself."⁶⁹ Paul Dumas in his article praised John Lyman for his criticism ("I will admit that I felt some pride at discovering in Canada a writer on art whose words wouldn't be out of place in the best European publications"), for founding the Contemporary Arts Society, and for his painting.⁷⁰ The other stars of the "Canadian Painting" section were Borduas, Pellán, de Tonnancour, and Roberts and, in a smaller way, the autodidact Mary Bouchard from the Charlevoix region – all French Canadian except Roberts, who in de Tonnancour's words had always been permeated with the French spirit and French traditions. Fernand Leduc's article on Borduas below is virtually a definition of *art vivant* from the Montreal perspective. Leduc celebrates Borduas as a creator of pure *art vivant*, a model for his circle and for the future. The piece reflects the vitality and excitement within that circle. Leduc argues as did the critic François Hertel in the supplement's lead article⁷¹ (but with a feistier tone) that their work is not revolution, but a continuation of what is humanly vital. Françoise Sullivan's and Jacques de Tonnancour's articles are also seen below; Sullivan offers

B O R D U A S



ABSTRACTION (Gouache)

La peinture est d'essence plastique. Je n'y toucherais pas. Il n'y a place qu'à la contemplation et à l'ivresse de vibrer au rythme universel de la géométrie sensible. La vie est sa loi. L'homme s'y révèle, vis ou mort. Joie ou désenchantement.

Ceux qui, sans préjugé, ont suivi Bordaüs depuis quelques années, ont participé à la Joie. Ils ont senti l'axe de vie d'un homme se confondre avec l'axe des lois de l'univers. Harmonie! Beauté! Joie! Leur sensibilité a été captée, leur intelligence ravie et une grande ivresse a conquis tout leur être. Bordaüs, peintre vivant!

Bordas : pénétrant dans la Joie de Vivre épousant les contours mêmes de la rigueur dans la discipline jusqu'à l'austérité. Ici, rien de facile, rien d'obtenu : une parfaite unité d'intention a présidé à l'évolution d'un problème bien défini qui s'est révélé à la seule intensité d'une volonté extrême soutenue par une attention sans cesse tout ordonnée, tout équilibrée, pendant qu'une intention plus haute et déintéressée, débordant les données du problème, et s'élevant bien au-delà des recherches conscientes mesquines de la matière ou de la forme, a réchauffé l'organisme puis l'a fixé en des rapports harmonieux : l'équilibre jaillit. Bordas, un plusticien. La peinture, un outil à émotion.

Tant pis si le fait de l'art sensible, de l'art, facteur d'émotion, heurte les conceptions d'une jeune génération. (Je ne parle pas de l'élément semblable de la vieille génération)

souvent choquée des talons de
Bordas, domine tout le tableau
d'ailleurs, recèle l'ordre fondamental
de l'homme, par conséquent du
monde. La vie y circule ardente,
généreuse, sère. La forme a peine à
la contenir toute, elle se présente
gigantesque, presque impudente
dans sa croissance, mais elle est
digne, altière, concise parfois jus-
qu'à la brutalité. Ce qui nous
frôisse est cette brutalité apparente
avec laquelle s'inscrivent en con-
tours indéniables, virils et vifs :
les muscles, les os, les crânes, les
d'une certitude. Notre dévotion du
doute, de la peur, remplace au
spectacle de la foi toute nue, sans

révolte d'enfermer son cœur dans une cassette, il faut nous ranger pour ou contre la vie, pas d'alternative. Notre inertie ne peut que retarder l'avènement du jour qui doit venir ou de la mort de force, nous assistons à l'effondrement des colonnes, piliers que nous nous obstinons à confondre avec les maîtresses-poutres. N'hésitons plus, renonçons dès maintenant au culte cher des momies, du falféti et de l'emphase. La vie réclame ses droits; accordons nos cœurs et nos vies à la cadence des lois du monde, de toute la vie de l'univers.

Fernand LEDUC

Si j'étais Jésus-Christ, et si Bonduy était poif, je dirais de lui: "Voici un véritable israélite, en qui il n'est point de ruse."

Bondini n'est pas savant dans l'art d'être simple. Sa simplicité lui est spontanée parce qu'elle se rapproche des sources de son art.

Je me souviens de ma première visite chez lui. J'allais peut-être rencontrer un de ces peintres de littérature, un de ces rats installés dans la peinture comme dans un fromage. Or j'ai rencontré, j'ai aimé un bonhomme et un poète.

Une vie orientée vers la sincérité de l'émotion, travaillée par la hardiesse de l'inquiétude, laisse toujours percevoir quelque splendeur. L'âme, dépossédée des jeux de l'amour-propre, s'y révèle recueillie, à une si juste justice.

L'art qui absorbe l'activité de l'homme est inhumain. Les clartés spirituelles de

Certains artistes généreux ont enfin tourné le dos à un passé que l'on ne pourra jamais ressusciter dans toute sa fraîcheur. Ils ont pris place aux côtés des créateurs qui nous ont offerts l'œuvre la plus noble et la plus humaine. Certes, il aurait été plus facile et plus rassurant d'exploiter les terres que les maîtres du passé ont défrichées, de les exploiter, mais aussi de les saccager. Les académiciens ont préféré la sécurité du conformisme. Voyons ces poètes médiocres qui patrouillent dans les jardins de Racine et de La Fontaine, ces peintres sans tempérament qui viennent mettre de l'ordre dans les domaines de Rembrandt, de Rubens et de Léonard.

Borduas aimait trop les œuvres des créateurs pour les imiter et les défigurer. Il s'en est nourri, mais dès qu'il eut des muscles solides, le regard clair, il se tourna vers l'inconnu sans se demander s'il continuait l'œuvre d'un maître. Il ne pouvait le faire, car il pénétrait dans un monde nouveau qui exigeait de lui, et de lui seul, une réponse nouvelle.

Bordus se place au tout premier rang des novateurs. Son message a d'autant plus d'importance qu'il l'a formulé ici même, dans un milieu où l'on en était arrié à croire que tout avait été dit. Il lui a fallu livrer un long et pénible combat, percer cette masse opaque, ces nuages de plomb des préjugés, de la peur, de la crainte de tout ce que la vérité a de dérangeant et d'imprévisible. Plutôt que de faire fructifier notre héritage, nous préférons trop souvent enfouir nos deniers sous terre et réduire en formules l'œuvre de saint Thomas comme les révélations des créateurs.

Une grande richesse reste inexploitée par la faute des faux maîtres



Photo du par de l'enseigne
de la marine et de la marine, comme

et des moralistes qui ont peur du risque, mais l'affranchissement qui vient de se produire aura une portée incalculable. Nous avons pu le constater à chacune des expositions de ces deux dernières années, et devant dans la joie, loin de toute inhibition, les exigences essentielles de l'art en même temps que celles de la création. Les jeunes peintres du *groupe des Sagittaires*, qui dont le nom, à Bordeaux, a été l'objet d'une démonstration, les plus doux seraient enrichis de cette période d'apprentissage sans contraintes extérieures et que les maîtres modernes, inimitables parce que trop près de nous, contribuent à la formation de l'intelligence de la jeunesse.

L'enseignement de Borduas, fait de sympathie vigilante, a permis à la personnalité de ses jeunes amis de s'épanouir, mais lui-même s'est engagé sur la voie périlleuse et remplie de promesses. Après s'être loquacement penché sur la nature, il s'en est détourné, mais sans la renier. Seulement, pour lui, la réalité ne saurait se réduire à ce que l'œil voit.

Cette révolution dans l'œuvre de Borda, dont les premiers signes apparaissent avant 1940, a été longuement préparée. Il constate tout d'abord que toutes les œuvres vivantes offrent une matière pure, mais il se rend compte par la suite qu'on ne peut rechercher pour elle-même cette pureté de la matière. Elle ne peut être que le résultat d'une recherche personnelle et sincère. L'artiste authentique, s'il pénètre sans complaisance dans le monde qu'il porte en lui, y touchera à la réalité essentielle: il est assés

généreux pour repousser tout narcissisme et pour dépasser le moi, qui

à un lieu où viennent se rencontrer le fini et l'infini. Borduas s'est placé dans ce lieu et, avec une attention désintéressée, il a écouté les voix innombrables qui s'y font entendre.

Le message de Borduas est avant tout d'ordre spirituel. Nous ne sommes nés à une époque où une

sommes plus à une époque où une découverte technique peut prendre autant d'importance que l'expression d'une forte personnalité. Bernard Berenson a pu écrire une forte étude sur les peintres italiens de la Renaissance en suivant l'évolution

de la manière de peindre et de la conquête de la réalité objective. De Giotto, le maître de la forme impossible, à Michel-Ange, le maître de la forme en mouvement, il note un progrès, mais ce progrès est-il accompagné d'un autre progrès ?

il synonyme d'approfondissement ? Berson lui-même paraît en douter. Il y a certainement moins de rigueur chez Michel-Ange que chez Giotto et, partant, une pensée moins vieillesse.

Fig. 5.9

Excerpt from the page devoted to Borduas in the 17 December 1943 *Quartier Latin* special supplement. The page included articles by Fernand Leduc, Jacques Dubuc, and Robert Elie. At the top is a reproduction of a Borduas gouache identified as *Abstraction*, and below is a photograph of Borduas by Jacques de Tonnancour. Image courtesy of Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec.

a picture of women artists' progress, and Tonnancour describes Goodridge Roberts as "no less magnificently evolved" for maintaining a rapport with the outside world.

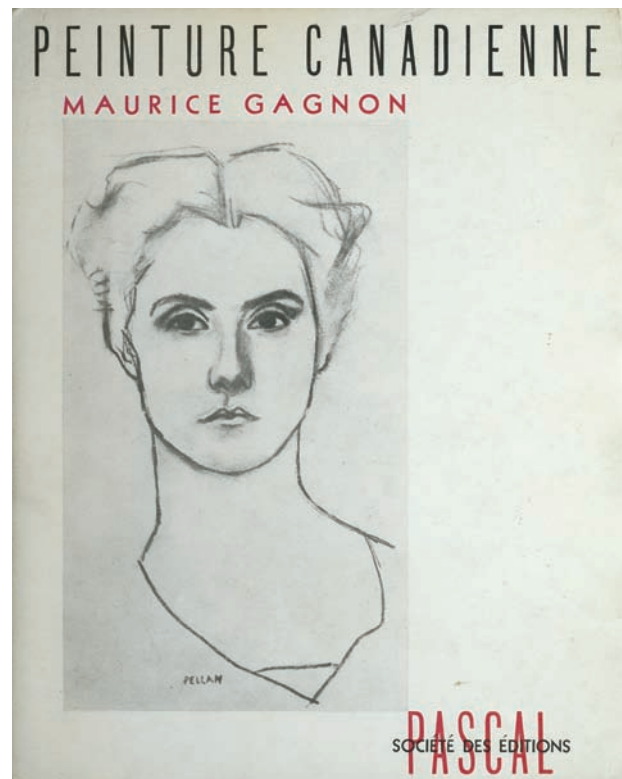
Montreal, through all its art and publishing and interaction with visitors from France, had become one of the great cultural capitals of the francophone world in the years since the war's beginning, as the historian Paul-André Linteau remarked.⁷² But in August 1944, Paris was liberated and it began to be safe to travel across the Atlantic again. At almost exactly the same time, Quebec's Liberal premier Adélard Godbout was defeated by a Conservative in the provincial elections, having lost popularity through his co-operation with Ottawa on conscription issues. So, wartime political liberalism ended in Quebec just as the cultural flow between Quebec and France began to reverse. But in Montreal *art vivant* was established and growing. The Ontario francophile Donald Buchanan remarked that in this city, "once the citadel of derivative tastes in art, a long retarded but now absolutely genuine enthusiasm for modern painting has developed. This is particularly true among the French Canadian professional classes, professors, teachers, lawyers and doctors, who are eagerly attending numerous lectures on art, reading books and articles by competent critics, and, above all buying paintings."⁷³ *Art vivant* had become a force in its own right.

The lectures and books and articles continued to appear in Montreal, along with exhibitions of work by these artists who demanded freedom. More young people

Fig. 5.10

Cover, Maurice Gagnon, *Sur un état actuel de la peinture canadienne* (Montreal: Société des Éditions Pascal, 1945). Image of cover courtesy of Bibliothèque et Archives Nationales du Québec. Drawing by Alfred Pellán © Estate of Alfred Pellán/SODRAC (2017).

The image is of Pellán's *Mademoiselle Denise Prêcheur*, also reproduced that year in a book of Pellán's drawings (*Cinquante dessins d'Alfred Pellán, avant-propos par Éloi de Grandmont* (Montreal: Éditions Lucien Parizeau, 1945, no. 26).



at the École du Meuble and elsewhere were turning to Borduas. He was, in the words of one, the writer Remi-Paul Forgues, their refuge and their compensation for the absurd era in which they lived; his works “know how to satisfy our hunger for equilibrium and perfection.”⁷⁴ Thérèse Renaud: “Each time he spoke, in our discussions, all at once things fell into place.”⁷⁵ Another: “We finally got permission to live according to our own rhythms and to create without constraints.”⁷⁶ And Pellán had his circle at the École des Beaux-Arts, from which, in 1945, Charles Maillard was finally drummed out.

In 1945, Maurice Gagnon published another book, *Sur un état actuel de la peinture canadienne* (*On the Current State of Canadian Painting*), and began by saying the title was meant to affirm the existence of such a thing at last: “In a country where nothing changes, something has changed.”⁷⁷ Over the last ten years, the universal and the human had replaced short-sighted regionalism.⁷⁸ “We Canadians have submitted to the particulars of reality long enough. We can now, in the best conscience, make work that is free.”⁷⁹ Gagnon praised James Wilson Morrice once more as the first great Canadian painter, Ozias Leduc for helping to set the stage for *art vivant*, John Lyman for founding the Contemporary Arts Society, and Father Couturier for organizing the *Indépendants* and other crucial exhibitions. He gave a bow to the places in Montreal that were finally showing *art vivant*, another bow to the Arbre publishing house for the *Collection art vivant*, and another to several critics, most of whom have been part of this narrative. He talked about the importance of good children’s art education and named the good teachers, Borduas

prominent among them but also Arthur Lismer, and he praised liberal teachers in the schools. All this he presented as a dynamic context for the first rank of contemporary painters – Borduas “the poet”; John Lyman; Goodridge Roberts; Stanley Cosgrove; the unschooled and therefore authentic Mary Bouchard, who, like almost all of Gagnon’s list, belonged to the Contemporary Arts Society; Louise Gadbois; Marian Scott; Eric Goldberg; Philip Surrey, and of course, Pellan. He cited the young artists of the *Indépendants* show and the *Sagittaires*. He affirmed that Canadian painting was finally in full stride, very much centred in Montreal, and based in the universal, in *art vivant*.

Four years earlier, the critic Reynald had remarked that Quebec art was between generations. The old was dying. What would replace it?⁸⁰ Now, there were confident answers to that question.

DEFENDING ART VIVANT IN MONTREAL: ARTISTS’ AND CRITICS’ WRITINGS

You have seen that respect for the painter James Wilson Morrice was tremendous among the rising devotees of art vivant in Montreal. The first piece here is a 1933 review by Henri Girard that drew attention to Morrice’s power of seeing and simplifying. Girard spoke to a growing liberal Montreal intelligentsia that opposed the city’s conservative elites,⁸¹ the very elites that Morrice escaped by moving to Paris in 1890. Henri Girard was an early defender in Quebec of the art that “liberates painting from the shackles of academicism, from its prejudices and its pictorial recipes.”⁸² He supported young francophone artists and their advocates in the battle soon to be fought for art vivant, not only against the academy but also against the narrowness both of a band of tiresome anglophone Group of Seven imitations and of the equally tiresome regionalist Quebec art loved by the francophone elite, who looked back to pre-modern Catholic life in the countryside⁸³ and felt threatened by the “progressive” nature of modern art and culture.⁸⁴

*The next piece is a notice about another Morrice show by the Montreal painter-critic John Lyman, who had lived in Europe from 1907 to 1931 and who possessed, according to the critic Paul Dumas, “the passion for ideas and the acuity of a Latin spirit” hidden beneath “the correct exterior of an English gentleman.”⁸⁵ Here Lyman offers his personal perspective on the life and art of his friend and early idol Morrice. The review appeared in the art column Lyman wrote from 1936 to 1940 for the *Montrealer*, a New Yorker-like magazine meant mostly for the city’s Golden Mile, the richest residential district in Canada. Lyman liked to situate his subjects, Canadian, American, and European, in a history of art that had Cézanne, Renoir, and Matisse as its stars, and since there was a surprising amount of work by them as well as Van Gogh, Bonnard, Dufy, and other French artists to be seen in Montreal galleries in the late thirties (at Watson, E.J. van Wisselingh, and especially W. Scott & Sons), Lyman could write about immediate examples. He often cited Clive*

Bell and Roger Fry and sometimes John Dewey too,⁸⁶ as well as the modernist writers Sheldon Cheney and Élie Faure. Like Fry, he insisted that what the artist feels about a subject is a picture's real subject. In 1945 he wrote in French a brief biography celebrating his hero Morrice.⁸⁷

The third piece in this section is an important statement on art and freedom by the journalist Jean-Charles Harvey. Harvey also wrote novels and short stories, and remarked in *Art et combat*, a 1937 collection of his writings, that he had devoted one part of his career to the expression of a dream of beauty and the other part, the combat part, to defending the rights of art and the artist.⁸⁸ It is that second task that he takes on here. Through the coming years, Harvey stayed on the side of representational art and would never support the non-figurative – although “one must be modern or risk living among the fossils” one didn't have to “plunge oneself in these extravagances to remain loyal to one's inner self.”⁸⁹ But this piece reflects his strong support for the broader concept of art vivant, and links it, as would often be done during the war, to anti-fascism (and Harvey's was a strong voice both against the international fascism of the thirties and for Canadian participation in the war).⁹⁰

Those three pieces from the thirties constitute an important prelude to the wartime writings that follow. The first two of these wartime pieces are by young writers: Jacques de Tonnancour's 1940 tribute to Pellan, citing Clive Bell's concept of significant form to explain why Pellan's return to Canada was so important, and Julien Hébert's piece, also on Pellan, explaining insightfully the importance of France to art.

Next is an excerpt from the 1942 essay “Canadian Painting Today” by the architect Marcel Parizeau, Borduas's colleague at the *École du Meuble*. It is a sign of the respect Parizeau had earned in the Montreal arts community that he was asked to write this essay for the catalogue of the exhibition *Aspects of Contemporary Painting in Canada*, presented at the Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts.* The essay presents Quebec art as the new Canadian mainstream, and features the same four Montreal painters as did both Maurice Gagnon's book on Canadian painting and the *Collection art vivant* of the *Arbre* publishing group: John Lyman, Goodridge Roberts, Paul-Émile Borduas, and Alfred Pellan. What a change in the international presentation of Canadian art, so much a Toronto-centred narrative to this point.

Next is an excerpt from Borduas's major essay “Ways of Savouring a Work of Art,” which appeared during what amounted to a campaign of acquainting the Montreal public with art vivant. In fact, this essay has the same genial, didactic

* An article in *Le Canada* on 13 October 1942 entitled “La peinture contemporaine du Canada à Andover: Révélation” explained that the show was jointly developed by the gallery's director Bartlett Hayes and by Patrick Morgan, who was an artist, a teacher at Andover, and a major promoter of Charlevoix county artists, including Mary Bouchard. Morgan, a relative of John Lyman, summered with his wife Maud at their villa in La Malbaie and gave exhibitions of Charlevoix painters there from 1934 to 1939.

tone as a defence of abstract art that Borduas's friend, the liberal Jesuit priest and intellectual François Hertel, had published in the literary review *Amérique Française* two months earlier.⁹¹ But, as is often remarked, ideas emerge in this essay that would reappear in vehement form five and a half years later in *Refus global*. This excerpt is from the essay's last section, where, after having sketched out his history of art in its living and dead phases, Borduas invites readers to bypass their reservations about *art vivant* and join the new era.

Finally, three pieces from the very important *Quartier Latin* supplement "Canadian Painting," published on 17 December 1943. First is Fernand Leduc on Borduas, and then Françoise Sullivan on the progress of women painters. Sullivan's "Feminine Art" may reflect the sexual stereotyping that was everywhere in the life and language in that era, but it is fair now to look beyond that to the real tribute Sullivan pays to these artists. Such a statement was rare indeed at the time. Finally, Jacques de Tonnancour's piece on Goodridge Roberts, where it is especially interesting to note the phrase "we created our own public." This is not the wartime urge for connection with "society" that was so strong in the English Canadian art world, as the next chapter reveals, but rather a long process of education and exposure that had brought an audience to *art vivant*. It is what de Tonnancour was speaking of when he described the effect the *Indépendants* show had of stripping its audience of their prejudices and making them independent.

Henri Girard, from "At Scott and Sons Gallery, J.W. Morrice," 1933*

James Wilson Morrice had, at age twenty-five, left for Europe in 1890 and was based in Paris for many years. He painted, travelled, and sent pictures to shows in England, the United States, and Canada as well as to European cities, but he never made known in Canada his vibrant late pictures painted in North Africa and the Caribbean. That "final brilliant flaring up," as David Milne so finely described those paintings in his letter to Donald Buchanan, only came out to the Canadian public in shows of the Montreal art dealers W. Scott & Sons, beginning in 1932, eight years after his death. Here, Henri Girard reviews one of those shows, and John Lyman reviews another in the text that follows.

Girard had written articles since the late twenties for the monthly cultural magazine *Revue Moderne*, where he published this review, and in the thirties he also wrote for the daily *Le Canada*, where he published the piece on Louis Muhlstock seen in the previous chapter. His thought was influenced by the French philosopher Henri Bergson, who had a central concept of an *élan vital*, a creative intuition with which one can imaginatively inhabit a thing or another person. Girard once began a 1933 lecture on criticism with a reference to Bergson and in that same lecture

* Henri Girard, from "À la galerie Scott and Sons: J.W. Morrice," *Revue Moderne* 14, no. 10 (August 1933): 5. Translation © Lola Lemire Tostevin.

*used Bergson's term "aesthetic emotion" – "émotion esthétique" – to describe what viewers intuitively experience in front of a work of art when they forget the self and become perfectly responsive to the work.*⁹²

The painter Morrice was, above all, a keen observer blessed with a dynamic sensibility. Well-to-do, a dilettante traveler, he recorded the world's most revealing features. Unhurried, always on holiday, he travelled the great cities of Europe and the picturesque corners of America, inscribing on his canvases in concise lines the colourful images of his emotions. Here is an artist who never painted for fame. He painted for the pleasure of it because he saw things (what is called *to see*) and he knew himself capable of conveying them eloquently, without borrowing from the language of others.

In Canada, what places his art on a superior level where emulation is rare, is that it proves to be totally without that insipid tenderness that seems to be a quality in art but which actually suffocates. How we love J.W. Morrice for having ignored pretence and affectation. This is what it came down to for this energetic man who was so taken by pictorial expression that he ceaselessly searched for the most perfect equation between reality and harmony.

Is Morrice's drawing rushed and careless? It only appears so to lazy eyes and conventional minds who judge all art in relation to a few classical paintings. His drawing imparts enough in its conciseness since it fully transmits images of nature in harmony with the artist's thinking. Details are missing? So what! For a painter of this calibre, it isn't a question of correcting insignificant facts. On the contrary, as Adolphe Boschot states in his "conversations on beauty," it is to "capture reality at its truest, at its most condensed, at its most intense, and transpose it to a level of superior beauty."^{*} Our painter obeyed instinctively the advice of Eugène Delacroix: "Don't seek useless perfection. What seem to be errors to ordinary people often bring about new life."[†] ... I have little doubt that James Wilson Morrice is one of our greatest artists. In any event, we know that of all Canadian artists he is the best known in other countries. His canvases are found at the Luxembourg Museum, the Lyon Museum, the museums of Nantes and Odessa, at the Tate Gallery in London, at the Philadelphia Museum and in several other large cities of the United States.

The Scott and Sons Gallery owns many paintings of great value by J.W. Morrice. To my reader I propose a casual visit to this excellent establishment at 1490 Drummond Street. If art has any appeal to him, it won't be a waste of time.

^{*} Adolphe Boschot, *Entretiens sur la beauté* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1927). Boschot was a music critic and poet.

[†] Eugène Delacroix, *Journal 1822–1863*, entry for 7 May 1824.

John Lyman, from “Morrice – The Shadow and the Substance,” 1937*

No doubt many readers will readily agree that these articles of mine are one of the more unfortunate features attending the present situation of painting among us. They answer to that extremely mental approach to the subject which is so common, to the need of formulating so much consideration of it in words. Rather than of their own impulse plunging themselves in it and soaking in it, too many people are apt to stand by passively and ask to be told what it is all about. This anaemic habit is not confined to our country or continent, but it is especially pernicious here. When art enriches the emotional experience it is a vitalizing agent, but mere cogitation about it wearies – is food for nothing but sophisticated patter. Criticism therefore should respond to a playful, abounding interest rather than to a grim demand for exposition. I believe it can be useful if only to persuade people not to approach art as something else than art. But too much reasoning about things that overflow reason befuddles our receptive apparatus and silences our imagination, from which art springs and to which it returns, if ever it does return. Certainly offering it mere reason as a nesting place is like offering a chattering rookery to an eagle.

Our exclusively verbal education is of course largely responsible for this sad state of things. There has not been much opportunity for the plastic arts to develop our visual receptivity – neither architectural ensembles, frescoed walls nor public collections of great sculpture and painting. Therefore when an opportunity does offer, as is the case just now, it is doubly valuable.

We have just had D[onald] Buchanan’s book on J.W. Morrice, whom future generations will look back on as one of Montreal’s and Canada’s most illustrious sons.[†] It gives all the verbal introduction anyone can need. And now we have a chance to enter into the intimacy of the man himself in the exhibition presented by Messrs. W. Scott & Sons during the coming month.

In its scope, if not in all its examples, it is the sort of collection a naive stranger might expect to find in the art gallery of Morrice’s home town. It spans his whole development, from the *Maple Sugar Camp*, one of his earliest known pictures and which appears to me to antedate the first ones done abroad, to the Trinidad landscapes, the *Port of Algiers* and the small North African figures, which were produced in the last two or three years of his life. There are landscapes which log all his travels, both in geographical displacements and in

* John Lyman, from “Morrice – The Shadow and the Substance,” *Montrealer*, 15 March 1937, 22.

[†] Two months earlier, Lyman had written a respectful review of Buchanan’s book and used it to dismiss academicism and English Canadian nationalist landscape in the same breath: “What the painters of other countries sought and found in France at the beginning of the century, the whole book relates. At home the academic corpse filled the air with its pestilential odour, in France tradition was alive. There they sought a new birth for painting. For there is no spontaneous generation in art any more than in organic life. Tradition does not come from rocks and trees, it comes from the hearts and minds of men” (“Morrice, the Master Incognito,” *Montrealer*, 15 January 1937, 18).

aesthetic experience: early trips to the Low Countries and Venice, Brittany of the middle period which concludes with the visits to Tangiers just before the war, the Caribbean islands and Barbary Coast of the late period in which contemporary influences are most manifest. There are figure pieces which conduct us from his Whistlerian attitude in *Louise*, through *Blanche* when he was emerging from his interest in Manet and the impressionists, to the summary synthesis that goes beyond mere visualization in the *Tunisian Dancing Girls* and *Arabs*. The only side of his work not represented is his nudes. Strange to say not a single one of them is owned in Canada. One wonders why the human body is in such disgrace among us. But I fear my question is more than a little rhetorical. Some people will certainly aver that the reason is elsewhere, that Morrice was an inferior painter of nudes. Not unless he was an inferior painter *tout court*. A true painter does not learn to paint *things*, he learns to express his feelings and thoughts, and, whatever the subject that engages his interest, he will express them on the same general level of quality.

With one of the pictures in this show I have precious associations. It is the splendid *Quebec Ferry* – one of the later Canadian landscapes – in which I made first acquaintance with Morrice. It was pointed out to me in the Salon of the Nationale by an American painter friend. This gentle and earnest soul was seriously concerned with a certain disregard for the conventional virtues evidenced in the world of artists in which he lived, and he had confided to me that he had made a study of the lives of the masters to see if it was necessary to indulge in loose living in order to become a great painter. He had concluded in the negative, much to his own peace of mind. Yet my mild and domestic friend was sufficiently moved by the art of Morrice to exclaim to me that day, “I’d be willing to drink whisky too if it would make me paint like your Canadian.”

Each man followed his destiny. My friend remained abstemious, and Morrice became a great painter.

Jean-Charles Harvey, “In Literature, in Art, to Be Free or Not to Be,” 1937*

Jean-Charles Harvey worked in Montreal as a journalist, first at La Patrie and then at La Presse, before becoming an editor for the newspaper Le Soleil, a job he lost in 1934 when one of his books was condemned by the Church. Three years later he founded the weekly Le Jour, which promoted tolerance and attacked any kind of political pressure on freedom of expression, especially in Quebec. That is where he published this piece.

* Jean-Charles Harvey, “En lettres, en art, être libre ou ne past être,” *Le Jour* (Montreal), 23 October 1937, 2. Translation © Lola Lemire Tostevin.

Friends have asked me to speak of pure art. They seem to reproach me for having distanced myself from an aesthete's career in order to deliver it to a battle of ideas. They seem to say, "You are betraying Beauty's cause for the Serviceable."

Me? Betraying? What am I doing when I fight for the preservation of democratic and liberal institutions? Can Beauty do without this, I ask you?

I am always and constantly delighted by beautiful displays: I taste them with my mind, with my heart, with my five senses; the sight of a flower and the song of a bird can move me to tears; my throat tightens when reading certain poems, certain pages of novels; the grandeur and power emanating from certain masters' paintings make me weep with joy; the unknown woman who walks by with the unconscious defiance of youth and lively harmonious lines, provokes my artist's admiration; the cult of ideal love and the thought of faithfulness to someone who is alive and for whom one lives are inseparable from profound and true art, and continually animate my dreams.

And yet, I readily liberate myself from the rude conflicts of ideas and allow myself to be accused of having turned my face from pure art that alone is capable of offering me the integral smile of life!

Let my friends be reassured. In fighting for democratic liberalism, I fight above all for freedom in literature and the arts. I know, and everyone knows, that writers and artists will never achieve anything good without being free. The main advice to all those young people who have been trained and have talent and want to grow, is: free yourselves, that is, be yourself!

If French Canadians have been so mediocre in literature and in the arts, it has not been because of a shortage of talent, but because of a shortage of freedom. They have been incarcerated. For a hundred years they have been subjected to intellectual fascism that has annihilated them. The expression of Beauty is not an on-demand product characteristic of parrots and monkeys. Only inspiration is creative and it is personal. There is no individuality without freedom! Intellectual fascism kills freedom, that is, individuality.

In other words, young artists, express freely what you carry within yourselves: therein lie your own resources. The resources of others do not concern you: they don't belong to you. They will bring you nothing valuable.

Jacques de Tonnancour, from "Views from the Promised Land," 1940*

The circle of young people around Borduas became closely tied to the Quartier Latin, the extraordinary student newspaper of the University of Montreal, when the paper started publishing articles by Jacques de Tonnancour in February 1940,

* Jacques G. de Tonnancour, from "En marge de l'exposition Pellon: 'Vues de la terre promise,'" *Quartier Latin*, 25 October 1940, 5. © Estate of Jacques de Tonnancour / SODRAC (2016). Translation © Lola Lemire Tostevin. Tonnancour also published this in a heavily elaborated form as "Alfred Pellon: propos sur un sorcier" in *Amérique Française* 1, no. 2 (24 December 1941): 13–22.

*and for some years, as other modernists joined him, the city's public discussion of art vivant was centred there. The Automatiste Claude Gauvreau wrote later that the Quartier Latin "had a reputation for high-quality cultural reporting which was not challenged anywhere. It became a place where sincere and enlightening judgments could find expression."*⁹³

Canada had, in James Wilson Morrice, its first great artist. He was thought of highly in France. Canada did not hold a very high opinion of him.

It is now Mr Pellán's turn to return from Europe where he was an international figure. Should Mr Pellán not be recognized as a master, it is to be hoped that his name and reputation will at least be acknowledged. A man who violates all indecision, complacency, and conformity can't help but outrage. A scandal, here, is hope. Stagnant water can't ignore a stone thrown into it. Let the repercussions reach all edges of the pond! [...]

Pellán draws upon exterior reality, the world in which everyone lives, only as a starting point for his own largely independent reality, a second reality with few ties with the all-too-familiar. What subsists of that is coincidence. It is by chance that fruits look like fruits, and that jars look like jars. Something in these coincides with his interior order. Red is not there because an apple is red. The apple is there because a specific amount of red is required for the composition. The object is not there for itself, but for the degree of colour it permits. An art full of thought; a full rendering of all faculties. A purity of art.

But Pellán does leap further; there can be a total abandonment of the real. He creates (or should I say he creates for himself?) another world depending only on the most profoundly subjective realities, the innermost exchanges. There, everything becomes decorative signs. Pellán dives so deeply inside these signs that we lose almost all contact with him. Left alone on the edge of the painting, without something more from Pellán, we say to ourselves: he is abstract. We conclude: it's an abstraction!

In painting, abstraction is an attempt towards a new purity. (Pure painting as in "pure poetry").* Music and poetry – to their great credit – do without description and story. We believe that painting should also liberate itself from all narration of object, from all representation of exterior reality. It should represent only the activities of sensibility, imagination, and intelligence (in fact, isn't all true painting only this?), the interchange of the mind with matter.[†] Just as a fugue represents nothing, a painting should represent nothing other than itself. It is, formally, a beautiful thing in itself. A distinctive whole with form as its subject.

* From Henri Brémond, a French literary scholar whose concept of "pure poetry" had been well known since the twenties.

† Matter – *la matière*, the material of painting – had a particular role in Borduas circles, as I noted above. Tonnancour wrote elsewhere that the artist thinks not with abstractions of the mind but with hands in the material; otherwise, the artist cannot discover his most secluded and unsuspected spiritual desires. ("Remarques sur l'art [suite]," *Amérique Française* 2, no. 7 [April 1943], 53).

As Clive Bell says so wonderfully, “A rose is not beautiful because it is like something else. Neither is a work of art.”* It is a truth common to every work of art! Its artistic value resides in its form and not in the possible perfection of its resemblance to something else that might have served as a beginning, a point of departure, a subject. The Parthenon, a Mozart symphony, a still life by Cézanne or Pellán, have no subject. They are pretexts for the perfection of a form.

Julien Hébert, “Pellán,” 1941[†]

Hébert, a future writer of surrealist-influenced poetry and in his maturity a famous industrial designer, studied at the École du Meuble and shared Jacques de Tonnancour’s first studio. He exhibited with the Sagittaires in 1943.

An art was, insofar as it was in France. It could have come from the other end of the world, but the confirmation of its existence and the affirmation of its worth came from France. Every work, all thinking worthy of universality, converged in France before being circulated throughout the world. France is what makes art universal.

While its quality remains intrinsic, if it is deprived of its purpose the art of the world suffers more than it does in war. We best understand dispossession through loss, and possession through dispossession. Misfortune wants the world to experience this.

If French art shines less at the moment, our memory of it imposes itself still. Deprived of French reality, we live from memories and, “currently,” on faith.

Pellán is the last memory, the live report of artistic thought in France. This is how I see it. Many artists before him came back from over there, but they arrived empty-handed or full of relics from the past.

Morrice had lived the art of his time and brought us some living art: it was a lot. Those learned, hazy impressionists pulled us from the depths of the unconscious. But as time goes by, the impressionists of our day are, like the Hellenists, people stuck in the past, confined to illusion and contemptuous of the present. *The twentieth century is ours and we are responsible for it.*

Last year, through conferences and texts whose truth shocked many who lag behind or who have been sidetracked, Father Couturier stipulated a means by which we should proceed. His encouragement and directions have already awakened many minds to a life of art.

I repeat, once again, the pathetic declaration: “our country has just been born, we are young ...” We have never suffered because of this, but we have suffered from isolation. Pellán has united us. He pushes us to catch up to a half-century

* A paraphrase from Bell, “The Debt to Cézanne,” *Art*, 338–9.

[†] Julien Hébert, “Pellán,” *Quartier Latin*, 19 December 1941. Translation © Lola Lemire Tostevin.

of delays. It is a race through a period remarkably full of innovation and invention, but also of deceptive experiences. His was the last word from France before circumstances diverted him from his work.

He brings us up to date and delivers a message: the confidence of France. This is his mission; or rather his work's mission, since Pellán is not a prominent person.

It is important that we accept this inspiring messenger. It is the inevitable and unique condition of our artistic future.

I believe that great art is now possible according to the great French tradition: a universal tradition. This opportunity is all the more a necessary duty given that the normal functioning of France has been hindered.

We owe Morrice, Father Couturier, Pellán, Maurice Gagnon, Borduas, and a few others, a commitment to art.

They allowed us to reflect France honestly and this is where our mission lies.

Marcel Parizeau, from "Canadian Painting Today," 1942*

The youthful quality of Canadian painting today is due less to age than to an enthusiasm (none of these painters is old, which doesn't mean inexperienced) that remains measured because it stems from a natural reserve, a common trait and bond among Canadians regardless of origin, influence, or cultural level.

Individuality and confidence, and perhaps a slight touch of arrogance, are expressed with dynamism and flexibility while remaining true to the self, regardless of artistic alliances and esthetic origins. For these artists, painting is neither plan nor ploy for achieving social objectives. The paintings exhibited here avoid such vulgar concerns.

Painting as an art is back again: the transposition does not exclude substance, tonal value, or the arabesque, without which there would be no painting or painter worthy of the name. These artists have avoided the errors of predecessors who tried to escape conventional patterns by painting somewhat uneven and strained anecdotal scenes that were more popular than felt. Not only do the paintings reflect loftier intention and inspiration, they display the challenge of translating these onto canvas. Diverse outlooks and independent views converge; inspired by an instinctive need to bear witness, the history of Canadian painting reflects the increasing use of a pictorial language that is precise, simple, supple, frank and honest, with no clichéd desire to seduce. The quality of its conviction is achieved by a prevailing dynamism.

* Marcel Parizeau, from "Peintures canadiennes d'aujourd'hui," in *Aspects of Contemporary Painting in Canada*, catalogue of an exhibition at the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA, 18 September – 8 November 1942, 15–28. Translation © Lola Lemire Tostevin. This essay was also published in a slightly edited version in the literary review *Amerique Française* 2, no. 2 (October 1942): 8–18.

That this art shuns anger and violence doesn't mean it lacks breadth and strength. It is, of its own accord, idyllic, in harmony with a peaceful, gentle, and somewhat withdrawn country living a dignified life without conflict, whose characteristic feature during this untimely course of events is motivated by tempered irony that allows for sympathy. A kind of wave envelops its soul and suppresses recrimination. It suggests a preference for, and a sense of, intimacy. To appreciate it requires pause and calm which, where pure art is concerned, is not entirely a bad thing. It almost completely overlooks virtuosity.

Curiously, for most (except for ingenious primitives whose discomfiting tricks make them even more delightful),* technique is but the objective of a demanding movement. Little is offered stylistically, possibly a shortcoming of this continent. There is, on the whole, little understanding of drawing technique which, in analogy, could be compared to graphic colour-blindness. There is often an inability to define or accurately contour a satisfactory line. There are either not enough words to complete a phrasing or too many of them. Is this uncertainty inbred, or is it due to a lack of imagination? We are too often left in a region of the possible. With the primitives, concepts are always well established, clear, with clarifying asides. Conversely, in much of this exhibition, there is indifference to the material's physical attributes and sensory side. While the language remains vivid, easily discernable and accessible, demonstrating fresh and gracious intelligence, it is sometime sharp, aggressive, and strained [...]

Without meaning to classify or categorize, certain psychological factors, parallels in development and influence, and common preoccupations lead to rapprochements. It is possible to identify, at a glance, disciples of the European School who have lived just about everywhere and absorbed from the old continent a common quality. The expression of their ideas is more assured, more researched, if not loftier. It is, in any case, clearer and more mindful, not disconnected from a conventional and familiar tenor, a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi*. It pleases an enthusiastic public who wants to be taken seriously. In a word, a more discernable thought process is reinforced by a richer, more resonant and liberated determination. There is less lost in asides and details bereft of meaning. I mean: Pellán, Lyman, Borduas, Roberts, Goldberg, Brandtner, Eveleigh.

Secondly, and I do not mean in second ranking, are the artists of Canadian expression. Several, such as Lismer, Mulhstock, Biéler, lived in Europe; others, such as Jori Smith, lived there early on for a short time, or without direct contacts, but accepted its influence judiciously, which is reflected in their art. This is the case of Louise Gadbois. Her little *Saltimbanque* displays graceful finesse and the discrete

* John Lyman said the "so-called 'primitives'" were perhaps a bit too heavily represented in the exhibition, but nevertheless it did show Americans "what is really alive in Canadian art," and the unschooled artists' work "has far more of the true creative spark than plenty of more knowing work that is often seen in our exhibitions" ("Canadian Art Show in U.S. Is Best Yet Sent Abroad," *The Standard* [Montreal], 24 October 1942).

refinement for which the Canadian temperament is adept. These artists possess a complexity of transposition essentially Canadian. They reflect and meditate, react and express themselves according to the milieu in which they are evolving. Others, such as Biéler, have come to express themselves more narrowly over the years. Originally from Switzerland, with a French formation, he has since working at Queen's University modified his art to the point where it is almost unrecognizable. Unnecessarily constrained and precise, he is now as formally meticulous as he was once spontaneous and free. On the other hand, Muhlstock trims and picks to the detriment of his artistic sensibility. Finally, Lemieux's composition has added, by way of realism, a certain breadth and physicality absent from his former work [...]

We proceed to the four artists from the East whose names are significant: Lyman, Roberts, Borduas, Pellan. John Lyman, as President of the Contemporary Art Society, is noteworthy. This artist of integrity puts a very high value on the art of painting. His guiding principle is simplicity, propriety inspired by moderation. He shuns everything that distracts and diminishes the quality of his thought; at first glance his ascetic tendency makes one pause, but it takes only a moment to recognize the precision of a sensibility in perfect harmony with his idiom.

Goodridge Roberts, represented by a nude, completes the variety of subjects normally limited to head portrait, flower arrangement, landscape or still life. His restrained style has something in common with Lyman but he allows considerably more room for the sensual. His tones vibrate. His palette, while measured, sings with nuanced objectivity stemming from the same joy of painting as Lyman's. The simple grace of his subject, a young male, is as exquisite as the artist's soul. It is truly remarkable that these two artists who come from such different backgrounds have found an equal sense of human dignity. Roberts is very engaging. As in Lyman, Borduas, and Pellan, French mastery can be detected in his work. However, he leaves no doubt that he has achieved an equilibrium between reason and sensibility, an essential factor in art throughout the ages.

Of all the Canadian artists, Borduas, who is represented by abstractions and one composition that is but a step from abstraction, is the one who has undergone the most striking transformation. Long reflection, a fine and delicate tentativeness, gaze turned toward the self, the recent audacious tone of his colleague, Pellan, recently returned from France because of the war, have set off a whirlwind. The last year set in motion a series of fifty startling gouaches, the product of spontaneous and lofty inspiration as if awakening from a dream, an accumulation of experience reacting automatically as if by reflex. In spite of a candid purity of tone, his perception, though controlled, overlooks nothing; his thinking is always circumscribed and sustained by experience and mastery. It is a new and important factor in Canadian painting, especially when it leads to renewal.

Pellan finally completes the list. He expands all aspects of Canadian painting by uniting them. His presence fills the vacuum of a few missing names. It is possi-

ble to detect in his work the instinct of unlearned artists alongside those of consummate knowledge. Seduced by workmanship, he is the only Canadian artist capable of ironing out problems, regardless how foreign, without ever losing his own individuality. Regardless of where he escapes to or how he proceeds he always remains free [...] Pellan, since Morrice, is Canada's most wide-ranging contribution to art.

The unexpected and fugitive instinct present in this exhibition confirms that all is well and alive in Canadian art. Precision and variety constantly refine and redefine its individuality; in spite of limited resources, it elevates itself by being undeniably current.

Paul-Émile Borduas, from "Ways of Savouring a Work of Art," 1943*

When art expresses the shapes of the invisible world, it causes a schism, a complete bewilderment, as if no one except artists possessed a world that is different from the one they inhabit, a world of familiar monsters, as François Hertel[†] elegantly put it.

This impassable chasm could have been foreseen. We had always looked for qualities that we could borrow, we loved the ideal beauties, the exterior beauties of nature, when we should have kept our eyes firmly fixed on the real beauties, on the objective beauty of the work of art. We had loved its abstract beauty, without loving its palpable one. When without palpable beauty, there can be no real abstract beauty. In art, we only loved what was illusory, thus preferring the shadow to the prey. Even though the former, as beautiful as it was, should never, on its own, have satisfied us. We constantly forgot essential beauty, when it should have received all our solicitude, all our love. In art, we only loved what was willed, realized, and achieved in figuration; in other words, that which is forever fixed, impersonal, and starting from death. When we should have examined in it that which was spontaneous, generous, fatally personal, therefore, that which is eternally living, hence necessarily changing.

On the one hand art is the illusory, the unreal appearance of life, but really, death in fixity. On the other hand, it is the tangible, with or without the unreal appearance of life, but it is real life in constant evolution. That is the disagreement: the public living in the death of art; the friends of the essential living the life of art.

These difficult conditions confused language. If living art uses its own language, we no longer hear it. If it uses ours, its own sense of reason disapproves of it. If it says, for instance, in our language, "You like the ideal beauties in art";

* Paul-Émile Borduas, from "Manières de goûter une oeuvre d'art," *Amérique Française* 2, no. 1 (January 1943): 31-44. Translation © Ery Contogouris.

† "Familiar monsters": Hertel used this idiom in his criticism to describe certain forms derived from the unconscious.

it is thinking, “Ideal beauty could exist only in its subject matter, which is the idea, outside of which no reality is possible for it.” – “You like natural beauties in it”; it thinks, “Natural beauty could exist only in nature, outside of which its aspect is illusory.” – “We say, this looks good, this looks bad”; it is thinking, “This is good, this is bad. What does it matter if good looks bad or if bad looks good.”

The extract from Genesis [quoted earlier] did not begin too early: “Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other ...”^{*} We should revise our notions and rebuild unity. Art can be the opportunity for us to completely renew our intellectual and physical life. The time is ripe: a powerful interest motivates us. For weeks, months, years, a deep anxiety has been spreading among us, brought about by the multitude of art works that are taken to be masterpieces, but that escape us, displease us, or horrify us. We feel that a new, powerful, and irresistible world is being built without us. How can we remain indifferent to it? Do we not need even more strength to resist than to abandon, while there is still time, the thick veil of our prejudices that harms us so.

Some of us already doubt some of yesterday’s convictions. Troubled, we interrogate the new era that is advancing, that is accompanied by horrible universal tragedy. A tragedy from which our entire beings suffer.

A heroic era has begun for many; it will spread to all. Why not join it right away? Do we not know that all that and all those who experienced success in the last century and a half were not necessarily the best? Do we not know that many great poets died unknown, that great scholars were persecuted, that great artists were ridiculed their entire lives? We know that these accounts are being revised, and will continue to be. We know that every human being should set to work on the profoundly human task of destroying in themselves that which has been corrupted, of redressing that which has been falsified, in order to further that which has remained healthy. The future should never again find us lacking [...]

I will repeat that every art object is made of two things that are equally real; of tangible material – metal, stone, wood, paint, paper, charcoal, etc. – and of the artist’s specific sensibility, and this sensibility has been imprinted in the very matter of the object. The more general and universal this sensibility is, the more it will be alive, identifiable, and pure. This is the only aim of the work of art. The rest is only an illusion.

The objectivism of ancient art is an illusion of the reality that is external to the artist. The subjectivism of newer art is an illusion of the artist’s interior reality. The work of art remains intact, untouched, inviolate. Only the illusion has changed. And the violence of the misunderstanding proves the extent to which we have loved, in the past, this dear and unique illusion.

^{*} Genesis 11:7, New International Version.

Impressionism, by closing one avenue, opened up another. The Fauves followed it. Roman artists did not only sculpt the physical features of their sitters: through them, they depicted their sitters' moral features as well. Matisse painted neither: he is seeking the unique expression of his conscious individuality through people and objects. Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, born to art within Impressionism, left it very quickly in order to return to the external form that had been sacrificed in favour of the light form. Paintings had become shimmering; these artists reconstructed them with a solidity that had been unknown until then.

Cézanne revealed the poetry of form. A revelation that received its strength from new experimentations. Cézannian form was poetic in itself. What was left to prove was whether it would remain so if it was dissociated from figuration. Cubism undertook this verification. It completely broke with the appearance of things: it disorganized them in order to reorganize them according to the demands only of plasticity. And unsuspected pictorial possibilities reveal themselves. Without immediate reference to the external world, without verisimilitude even, poetry and substantial beauty persist. Sensibility remains intact, and matter, very pure. The resounding truth sings a victory song.

The circle of external nature is closed by Renoir, Degas, Manet. The circle of expression proper, of the means employed, the intermediary between the artist and the visible world, is closed by Cubism. Only one circle remains open: that of the invisible world, specific to the artist, Surrealism.

Our scholarly ignorance of people, of life, seems to open a never-ending terrain to the eternal explorer that is art. Certain directions take shape. Paul Klee seeks the mysterious route of pure reason through geometry. (I am ashamed to tell you these things so quickly. Only a poet could do justice to such marvels. In fact, as I write, I feel the immensity of these truths, mysteries, and beauties shrink, become minimized, even escape me.) Paul Klee's geometry is not abstract, or harsh, or anything resembling the geometry of schoolbooks. On the contrary, it is filled with the most divine sensible matter. It is all emotion, all mystery, all life.

Dali scorns the plastic discoveries of Cézanne and the Cubists. He sometimes uses photographic means of expression, expecting to find the revelation he seeks through the strangeness of his juxtapositions: a telephone in the middle of the desert, for instance. At other times, reacting violently against hardness (he prefers the Pre-Raphaelites' Adam's apple, as he writes in an amusing article,^{*} to the inedibility of Cézanne's apple), he is seeking a way to express unpredictable softness. Dali and some young painters experiment with the paranoiac screen, which Leonardo da Vinci invented. When one of his students would ask him what subject to paint, Leonardo would answer, "Go to an old stone wall, look at it closely for a long time, and little by little you will see beings and objects appearing in it.

^{*} Dalí, "Le surréalisme spectral de l'éternel féminin préraphaélite," *Minotaure* 8 (1936), 47.

You will discover in this way a very personal subject for painting.”⁹⁴ It should be enough to say that decalomania is one of the screens used. And lastly, another avenue is that of automatic painting, which would allow the plastic expression of images and memories that the artist has assimilated, and that would make visible the sum of his physical and intellectual being.

The future remains whole, unknown. It will reveal its secret only to those who do not fear life, who generously offer themselves to it, spontaneously owning the past.

Fernand Leduc, “Borduas,” 1943*

Fernand Leduc had studied with the Marist brothers and then at the École des Beaux-Arts, but by the time he wrote this piece he had left the church and was part of the Borduas circle. He exhibited with the Sagittaires earlier in the year.

Painting is plastic in essence. I won’t touch it. There is only room for contemplation and intoxication when the universal rhythm of a sensitive geometry vibrates. Life is its law. Man declares himself dead or alive. Joyful or disenchanted.

Those who, without prejudice, have followed Borduas for many years have participated in the joy. They have perceived how the axis of the life of a man can fuse with the axis of the laws of the universe. Harmony! Beauty! Joy! Their sensibility has been captured, their intelligence transported, their being overpowered with exhilaration. Borduas is a painter who is alive!

Borduas: plenitude in the joy of living unites with the contours of a rigorous discipline that is almost austere. Nothing is easy here, nothing secure. A perfect unity of intention presides over the evolution of a well-defined problem that reveals itself as intense desire, extreme will sustained by astute attention to order, to balance, while a higher, more dispassionate intention overflows the given of the problem, breaks free of the conscious and petty analysis of matter or form, excites the organism, fixes it in harmonious relationships; emotion springs forth. Borduas, artist. Art, an agent for the emotions.

It is unfortunate that art’s sensibility, the stimulus of emotion, should clash with the preconceptions of a young generation (I won’t refer to the similar element of an old generation; let the dead bury the dead) in search of purity but disabused by the lies of The School. The most talented, even the best intentioned, are reluctant to abandon their preconceptions of an entity distinct from all other forms of human intelligence and to draw solely from their whimsical and capricious imagination; they fear the noble mission in which man, scholar, artist, strives for lyricism. So much the worse and so much the better if art is of a lofty essence.

* Fernand Leduc, “Borduas,” *Quartier Latin*, 17 December 1943. Translation © Lola Lemire Tostevin.



Fig. 5.11

Pierre Gauvreau, *Fernand Leduc en arlequin*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 66.0 × 50.5 cm. Fonds Pierre Gauvreau, c151686k, Library and Archives Canada.

In painting, there are the creators: those who construct and orchestrate from within, the meaning of life. They alone are painters. There are of course the enthusiasts of styles, of systems, assemblers of precious materials and astonishing forms; they also aspire to goals and erect private facades to their cause; they are the engineer-painters, neither engineers nor painters.

Borduas, creator! His art is a ripe fruit, round and firm. Only maturity detaches it from the tree. Life in bloom ... Before being a picture, a painting is man himself. Life circulates at the roots, invades the flesh, warms the heart, activates the spirit to a universal rhythm, and life spills over, branches out, stretches, crystallizes in sensitive forms; life assumes a face, a character, a look. Abundant, supple, varied, transparent, matter springs forth; colour bursts out in warm resonance, pure and subtle; a broad and deep rhythm insinuates itself; the joy of living has assumed a body.

The end result is a certain countenance. The content of this container is its most important aspect. The often chaotic appearance of Borduas's canvases, as in all nature for that matter, harbors the fundamental order of man and the world. Within it, life circulates avidly, generously, proudly. The form, barely able to contain it all, presents itself awkwardly, almost impudent in its pregnant state, but always dignified, proud, concise, almost brutal sometimes. What disturbs us is this explicit brutality with which truth and life are so decisively outlined: a street urchin's challenge coupled with the swaggering affirmation of certainty. Our own devotion to doubt and fear lashes out at this display of belief stripped of artifice and fanfare. We yield to apprehension just as the world always yields when the initial thrust of creative power manifests itself in painting. Nothing was meant to please or flatter, nothing objective or symbolic; this is an art of renunciation in which everything that can be excised has been excised, so that order, proportion, equilibrium, nuance, all that is infinitely perceptible to an infinitely powerful sensibility, has been allowed to radiate. In brilliant purity, the intent emerges, its intellectual activity drawn in concise lines, the rules of the game obvious. Everything that is to be understood is understood. Life first, living painting next, the mechanism that provokes emotion.

Those who need words like "revolution," "school," and all the "isms" to define the work of Borduas have understood neither art nor life. If it is true that normality belongs to the majority, then the dead are right, life is revolution. Borduas did not break with anything, he continued everything. Life disturbs the dead and if Borduas has managed to awaken a few dozers, is that so bad? His art continues the living art of accumulated centuries, it is the art of a man living in '43 and extending all the power of his energies toward '44. To prepare for tomorrow today is not characteristic of a younger generation. It is no longer a secret that we are enervated. We have just enough strength to shelter our last breath against the false accusations of partiality, of enthusiasm and fanaticism; we might as well reproach ourselves for having faith. Leave the agonizers to moan. It is no longer a question of clan, of partisanship or parochial spirit or school; it is a question of life or death. We don't judge a man, we judge a principle revealed by a man. We call upon life, not only in the most evolved manifestations of maturity, but the life of a child taking its first steps towards the resolute steps of middle age; all of life is in motion! It isn't a question of valuing one man over another; time takes care of that. What we are sure of is that consensus will rally around those works that are uniquely alive.

The upcoming generation does not have the right to ignore a true painter, a living painter, a creator whose art is above all a manifestation of life. This generation is aware of a new spirit; the time when it confined its heart to the church censer is gone. In any event, this generation has no alternative; it must take a position with or against life. Our inertia can only delay the day when, like it or not, we will witness the collapse of those pillars we so stubbornly believed supported

us when in fact they only offered us shade. Don't hesitate any longer; from now on, abandon the cherished cult of mummies, of forgeries and bombast. Life reclaims its rights; let us reconcile our hearts and our lives to the rhythm of the laws of the world, to the life of the universe.

Françoise Sullivan, from "Feminine Art," 1943*

Sullivan's longest paragraph goes to Mary Bouchard, who had no art education and who lived in rural Charlevoix County on the north shore of the St Lawrence.[†] Montreal's modern art community discovered Bouchard in 1936, and a year later she was included in a show of Charlevoix "modern primitives" in New York. In 1941 she became a member of the Contemporary Arts Society.⁹⁵

Françoise Sullivan was a student at the École des Beaux-Arts when she wrote this, but was already part of Borduas's circle and had exhibited with the Sagittaires. She was to become famous in her long career as both a dancer and a painter.

In the last fifty years women have made their presence known in an area that had not previously been considered their field. They have cast off the yoke of centuries of prejudice and discovered new means of expression without compromising their femininity. Art has seduced them.

In their nimble fingers, painting has been transformed; one is far from masculine painting. Theirs is a different sensibility; and it is true art. Depth of expression is not inherent to masculinity alone; there is nothing fundamentally essential that prevents a woman from creating vibrant works of art.

One has only to mention a few pioneers: Suzanne Valadon, Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassatt, Louise Hervieux, and closer to home, Jacqueline Marval, Lucie Couturier, and Marie Laurencin. And finally, at home, amongst many others are Louise Gadbois, Jori Smith, Prudence Heward, Marian Scott, Denyse Gadbois, Sybil Kennedy, Mary Bouchard, Jeanne Rhéaume, Yvonne Roy, Louise Renaud, Mary Moniate, to name but a few who make us foresee a bright future for painting in Canada.

Louise Gadbois, with her gentle femininity, her personal elegance. Her diaphanous art, light and delicate, is without affectation and always sound.

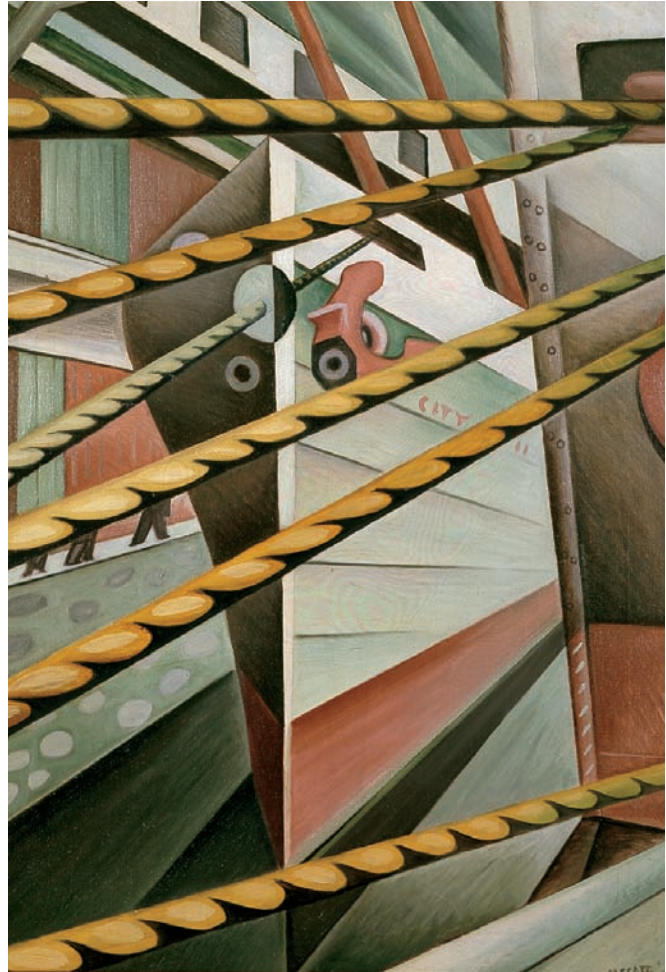
It is perhaps because of the American quality of her paintings that Prudence Heward is not as well appreciated as she should be. (When will we be invulnerable to this influence?) Because of her evolving forms and her compositions of

* Françoise Sullivan, from "La peinture féminine," *Quartier Latin*, 17 December 1943, 7. Translation © Lola Lemire Tostevin.

[†] In Gilles Hénault's article "The Question of Primitivism" on the second page of the same *Quartier Latin* supplement, Bouchard's "truly miraculous" pictures are similarly applauded. He goes on to say that every true artist is self-taught, since the only source of essential values is within oneself; and faithfulness to oneself requires more rigour than all the tricks of the trade.

Fig. 5.12

Marian Mildred Dale Scott, *Harbour*, ca. 1939. Oil on canvas, 74.0 × 51.2 cm. Art Gallery of Alberta Collection, purchased in 1980 with funds donated by Canada Permanent Trust Company, 80.1.



simple objects always unexpectedly arranged, her paintings emanate intense poetry and a zest that is unique.

In Marian Scott, one finds sharpness and intelligence that never cloud her gentle feminine qualities.

Sybil Kennedy's sculptures display elongated forms with sinuous lines.

With Denyse Gadbois, one admires the resolute stroke, the subtle and feminine colouring.

The last canvases of Jeanne Rhéaume confirm a growing sense of control.

It is particularly important to mention Mary Bouchard, perhaps the most powerful of our woman painters. Her primitive art recalls the Douanier Rousseau. This young woman paints scenes from her part of the world unaffectedly, in a charming peasant style. She is, at the very least, a good painter for fans of "Canadian paintings." In her world, everything is generous, the light, the colouring and drawing. She idealizes. She touches an essence which moves us profoundly.



Fig. 5.13

Simone Mary Bouchard, *Self-Portrait, or Simone Mary Bouchard at the Beginning of Her Career*, 1938. Oil on canvas, 79.8 × 72.2 cm. Collection of Musée National des Beaux-Arts du Québec, gift of Richard M. Alway (2010.208). Photo credit: MNBAQ, Jean-Guy Kérouac.

Françoise Sullivan was not the first writer to praise Mary Bouchard's work. Robert Élie had said in reviewing the 1942 Contemporary Arts Society show that in her four paintings "the beauty of design and colour reveal a soul that is delicate and naïve, that is to say, absolutely transparent ... Mary Bouchard piles up details, but none are unnecessary. With what subtlety and what vivacity she paints a chair, a door" (Pierre Daniel [Robert Élie], "De Borduas à M. Bouchard: Exposition de la Société d'Art contemporain à la Galerie des Arts," *La Presse* [Montreal], 14 November 1942).

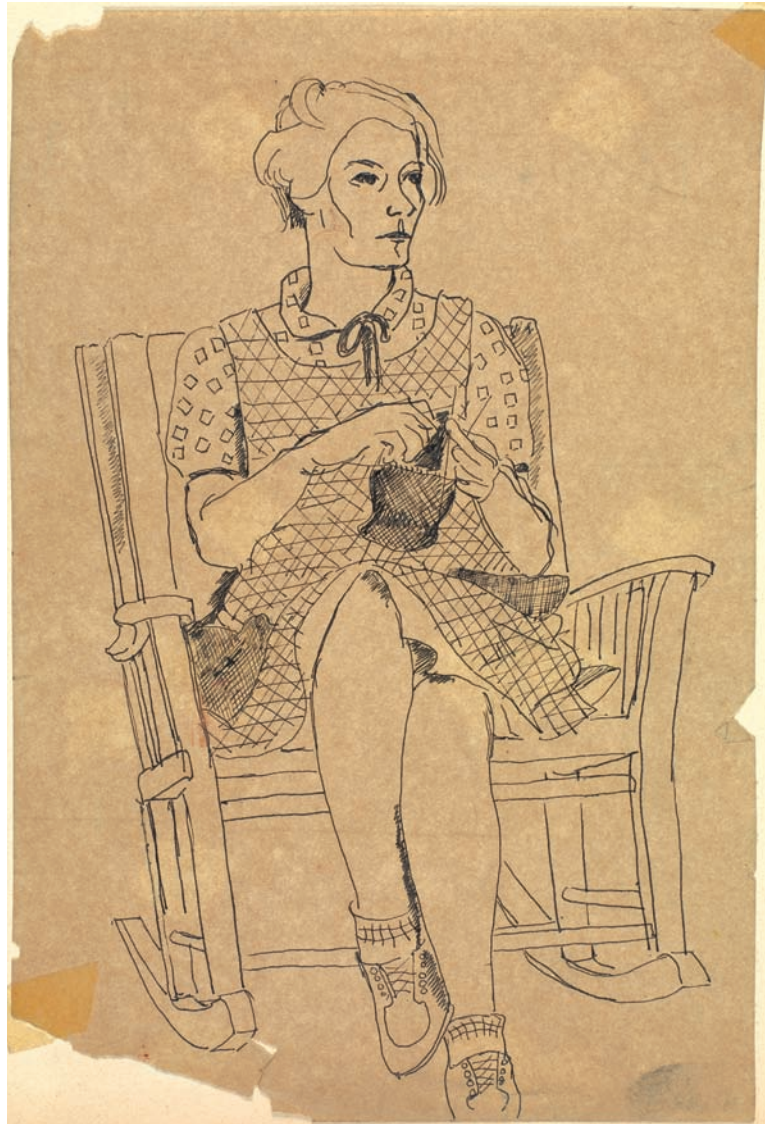


Fig. 5.14

Jori Smith, *Woman Sitting on Rocking Chair Knitting*, n.d. Pencil and black ink on brown wove paper, 21.4 × 14.4 cm. Jori Smith fonds, e016755322_s2, Library and Archives Canada, accession no. 1996-13-550.

This drawing comes from a sketchbook Smith used from 1929 to 1942, mostly in Charlevoix County. Myriam Asselin studied the sketchbook in detail and suggested that it represents a woman of the Odet family of the village of Saint-Hilarion (Asselin, “Jori Smith et Charlevoix,” 13). Jori Smith and her husband Jean Palardy spent many summers and some winters in Charlevoix – not at Malbaie or Baie Saint-Paul, which were magnets for artists, but in more remote areas. While the male artists painted mostly landscapes, Jori Smith was drawn to people, and Édith-Anne Pageot has described her importance within the context of the “social humanism” of the painters of modernity of that era in Quebec (Pageot, “Jori Smith, une figure de la modernité”). Smith was, as Pageot points out, an urban anglophone (if bilingual) outsider recording the lives of rural people – in other words, a tourist with a modernist nostalgia for a traditional culture (Pageot, “Jori Smith, une figure de la modernité,” 180; see note 24). But she had warm connections to the families she and her husband visited and with whom they stayed. “We danced with them, supped with them, sang with them” (Smith, *Charlevoix County*, 1930, 24).

Jacques G. de Tonnancour, from “Roberts,” 1943*

Like Borduas, Pellan, Lyman, and de Tonnancour, Goodridge Roberts was honoured with a full page in the special “Canadian Painting” supplement of the Quartier Latin. Having moved to Montreal in 1936, he was an artist-teacher whose pupils included de Tonnancour, and he was a charter member of the Contemporary Arts Society. As Roberts himself wrote not long afterwards, “by 1943 my work had found considerable favour in French Canadian circles, and in the spring of that year a retrospective exhibition was organized by the critic Maurice Gagnon and held at the Dominion Gallery.”⁹⁶ For the first time one of my shows was financially successful.”⁹⁷ In fact, as Sandra Paikowsky has pointed out, the French press started reviewing him a decade earlier and with “greater analysis and insight” than did anglophone critics.⁹⁸

Jacques de Tonnancour published a brief monograph on Roberts in 1944 in L’Arbre’s Collection art vivant series, another sign of Roberts’s status in Montreal’s francophone art community.

Roberts, like many other living artists, is becoming popular. This is a fact. However, it doesn’t mean that the public is deserting Coburn, Clarence Gagnon, Jongers and the entire Royal Academy. This particular public has not lost faith. We know it well and are leaving it in its hands.

The present phenomenon is other than a simple massive desertion. We have not pulled the blanket from our side and left the Academy with its feet exposed. We have created our own public, a real, definitive public who lives and lets live and, consequently, it has the ability to evolve, adapt, and be contemporary. If it understands what is being done today it is precisely because it looks to the past in order to discover what is contemporary today, a human dynamism that lives still.

The conquest was long; long because of its preparation. But it was accomplished suddenly in the last few years and it brought to painters who were sometimes diametrically opposed a more sensitive and wider public than the other one. It is a public who is able to recognize and discern respective qualities and situate them on a common pictorial plane.

This public who is attracted to Roberts’s work is of no less significance than in the case of other painters. Roberts’s work does not have the weakness that gives easy access to the amateur. Even if he maintains a rapport with the outside world, he is no less a magnificently evolved painter.

He offers, no, he doesn’t offer, he brings to life a dense and unified pictorial surface, without openings for impudence or insolence, but it has to be accessed simultaneously through its sensitive and its logical entity.

* Jacques G. de Tonnancour, from “Roberts,” *Quartier Latin*, 17 December 1943. © Estate of Jacques de Tonnancour / SODRAC (2016). Translation © Lola Lemire Tostevin.

Roberts doesn't try to convince anyone. The amateur is always on his own in having to determine the qualities of a painting that are not readily obvious. It is up to him to discover them and Roberts doesn't offer any deployment plan or road maps ...

I remember how I came to appreciate his work. I had noticed the extraordinary simplicity of his means. I saw considerably more upon returning later to those same paintings. In a circus as ridiculous as the Spring Salon, Roberts's dignified and serious attitude impressed me as being the most brutal condemnation of what surrounded him. Silence and calm can sometimes be powerful ...!

The War and the New Cultural Order

Perhaps some day radio will be so powerful battle field screams and the suck of sinking ships with their despairing chorus of the drowning will reach our ears. That frightfulness would surely end war. We could not bear it.

Emily Carr, at the onset of the Second World War

The dominating fact, in Canada, as everywhere else, Today, is War. It hasn't come to us in bombs; St. Catherine Street is unbroken; the tower of Toronto's City Hall still stands; but it is changing our habits, it is eating into our minds like a corrosive acid. Our Day, then, is a time of change, of grave anxiety, of nightmare.

Robert Ayre, in a 1940 exhibition review

These two statements remind us of the enormity of the experience of the Second World War even for Canadians who did not go overseas, and help to explain why it is not surprising that the war changed the ways people felt about art.

While the writings show that Montreal artists and critics who fought for *art vivant* had committed themselves to a struggle for liberation, some English Canadian painters practically ceased talking about art at all, and some even stepped back from making art. Arthur Lismer commented that “exhibitions come and go – artists stand and dream in front of blank canvases, saving them for better days. Craftsmen look at their tools and regard their hands and wonder if they can ever turn material into meaning that would be of any account in this mad world again. Teachers of art repeat the histories and the principles to students whose minds, ears and eyes are turned only to thinking, listening and seeing the things of the moment – the news of battle and heroes, the ebb and flow of conflict.”¹ The painter Marian Scott said that she, “like so many painters of today, was feeling disturbed and inadequate in the isolation of the studio. No doubt the war is partly responsible for this desire to leave the studios, the ivory towers.”² In the same spirit, the *Canadian Forum* virtually stopped publishing art criticism as such, although it had so recently been central to the art-and-society debates of the Depression and the Spanish Civil War. Now it was “concerned, like the rest of the world, with the artist’s place in society, handicrafts and industrial design, museums and their public.”³ This was the atmosphere in the English Canadian art world.

Of course there were those who agreed with John Lyman, who wrote: “Innumerable artistic activities have been necessarily suspended, but the opinion has been widely expressed that, as an essential part of the freedom of thought and expression

for which we are fighting they should be carried on wherever the exigencies of war permit.”⁴ But a great many artists and art writers craved a public role, even more than the leftists among them had done during the thirties.

Some grew less eager to pursue expression through formal means. The artist André Biéler, devoted before the war to modernist subjectivity as much as to social causes, suggested in a 1942 exhibition review that what was needed now was for artists to do more to express “the deeply emotional essence of our time” and to work toward unifying Canadian thought and culture.⁵ New Brunswick artist Jack Humphrey had done this in his painting *People Waiting*, Biéler thought, by “subduing the plastic effects of the paint. In this work the bravura of the brush, the plane of the canvas, completely disappears,” so that “there is no screen between the onlooker and the crowd; we automatically become members of it.”⁶ Along the same lines, Miller Brittain of New Brunswick said in his statement “Art To-Day” that “the elimination of ‘personal caprice’ has the certain effect of bringing art and the artist into the mainstream of life.” Barker Fairley remarked more bluntly that “the obsolete ‘art for art’s sake’ direction” is “no good today and perhaps never was any good.”⁷ Harry Mayerovitch went as far as to say that easel painting was dead and that contemporary life demanded lithographs, cartoons, and murals. “In times like these, the artist shouldn’t limit himself to expressing his own personality and idiosyncrasies: he should express the feelings and aspirations of society as a whole. Above all he should learn to *associate*.”⁸

As the war geared up, many English Canadian artists (as well as musicians, writers, and dramatists)⁹ tried hard to put their skills into service. Two days before Canada declared war, Montreal painter and architect F.B. Taylor had already begun urging the Department of National Defence to give him war records work.¹⁰ What he got, after much negotiation, was permission to paint unofficially in the factories that produced war equipment. Other artists – Alma Duncan, Louis Muhlstock, Caven Atkins, Carl Schaefer, Charles Goldhamer, Ernst Neumann, Ina D.D. Uhthoff, and Fritz Brandtner – also drew and painted in industrial plants, and a few got permission to paint military subjects in Canada.¹¹ Twenty-two painters donated works to a poster program set up to decorate military buildings in Canada and abroad.¹² In 1940 the Historical Section of the Department of National Defence commissioned work from a few artists, notably E.J. Hughes and Orville Fisher of Vancouver.¹³ Some artists joined the various branches of the armed forces and a few of them were commissioned from within their branches to make war paintings. Others did volunteer work or found other ways to support war initiatives. Even leftists supported the war effort once Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, and once the Communist Party of Canada, illegal since the beginning of the war, was returned to legitimacy. Paraskeva Clark was thrilled to hold a sale aiding the Soviet Union during the siege of Leningrad, her home town: “If I can transform even some of my paintings into food, clothing and medicines for Russia I shall be content”; and she continued doing activist work on behalf of the USSR.¹⁴



Fig. 6.1

Ina D.D. Uhthoff, *Girl Welder at Work*, 1944. Oil, 76.7 × 69 cm. Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, accession number 1993.050.001. Harold and Vera Mortimer-Lamb Purchase Fund. Paris Number: 12435.

One version of this painting (there were several studies and three final versions) was in the 1944 *British Columbia at Work* exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery, a show demonstrating British Columbia's in-country contribution to the war (Sutherland, "The Labor Arts Guild," 6–9, 40; on Uhthoff and the war years, see also Johnson-Dean, *The Life and Art of Ina D.D. Uhthoff*, 45–59). The painting is based on Uhthoff's study of a worker at the enormous Esquimalt Graving Dock outside of Victoria, BC (conversation with Michael Uhthoff, 4 November 2016). Uhthoff was a force in the Victoria art world. She opened and ran an art school and co-founded the local branch of the Federation of Canadian Artists, and in 1945 she co-founded the exhibition space originally called the Little Centre, which four years later became the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. She also wrote a review column for the *Victoria Daily Colonist*.



Fig. 6.2

Philip Surrey, *Every Canadian Must Fight*. Created ca. 1941–42 for the National War Services. Offset lithograph, 76 × 54.6 cm (paper size). C-087139, Library and Archives Canada, accession number 1983-30-209.

According to a February 1943 interview with Surrey, a giant copy of this poster showing a worker handing ammunition to a soldier hung at the back of the stage during a famous Paul Robeson concert at Montreal's Forum in May 1942 (Patrick Anderson, "IV. Paintings," n.p.).

Fig. 6.3

Jack Weldon Humphrey Painting the Portrait of Delia MacFarlane Cody at the Art in Action Session of the Maritime Art Association Convention, Provincial Normal School, Fredericton, New Brunswick, ca. May 1942. Photograph by D.J. MacLean. New Brunswick Museum – Musée du Nouveau-Brunswick (www.nbm-mnb.ca), 2002. 2002.7.8.

In the foreground on the left is Humphrey's painting *People Waiting* of 1941 (oil on masonite, ca. 76 × 91 cm, priv. coll.), the work that André Biéler found so successful in removing "the screen between the onlooker and the crowd." Walter Abell helped the artist Ted Campbell to organize this evening of free art demonstrations for the public in the gymnasium of the Provincial Normal School. Kirk Niergarth notes that this was one of the events showing that the community of New Brunswick artists shared with Walter Abell a sense of artists' potential to be useful to society (Kirk, *Dignity of Every Human Being*, 13–14). This photograph accompanied Kathleen Shackleton's article "Art in Action," *Maritime Art* 2, no. 5 (June–July 1942): 158.



The 1942 Canadian Group of Painters exhibition catalogue summed it up: there was a widespread belief that

art in its various forms is of only relative importance and that for the time being, artists should turn to more useful occupations. Many Canadian artists would agree in principle with this attitude and would welcome any opportunity to serve their country. Some of them have joined the active forces, others are doing good work in various forms of publicity – posters, illustrations, etc., others are teaching, and many of them are associated with the Canadian Red Cross and other organizations in war service.¹⁵

But artists had no official place in the war, no organization within which they could make a collective effort, and as *Saturday Night* art critic Graham McInnes said, "In this war, above all wars, organization was the prime need. Anyone outside an organization felt useless and was often regarded as such." Artists, "eager beyond measure" to contribute creatively to the war effort, simply had no place.¹⁶

So, they needed to organize, and in June 1941 some 150 painters, sculptors, and graphic artists, an overwhelmingly anglophone group, came together in Kingston, Ontario, for Canada's first large-scale artists' meeting. The Kingston Conference, now much written about,¹⁷ was intended to focus on bringing together art and society, without bias toward particular art practices or politics.¹⁸ One keynote speaker was Walter Abell, known to his audience as the author of *Representation and Form* and for various roles in the Maritimes. In his speech "Art and Democracy," published later that year in *Maritime Art* magazine, Abell, taking a broadly leftist position, described the cultural chaos caused by industrial capitalism, contrasting this



Fig. 6.4

Dorothy Stevens, *My Day at the Canteen*, ca. 1942. Oil on canvas, 96.8 × 78.9 cm. C-135080, Library and Archives Canada, accession number 1989-284-1.

Stevens had made etchings of workers on the home front during the First World War, and here in another war she returns to the subject. She was well known as both a portrait painter and printmaker. The figure on the right may be “an idealized self-portrait” (Anon., description of painting, Library and Archives Canada, container no. C-135080). Stevens volunteered at the Active Service Canteen in Toronto (McIntosh, “Other Images of War,” 102–3).



Fig. 6.5

At the First Conference of Canadian Artists, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, June 1941. Detail of a photograph by Hazen Sise. PA-151359, Library and Archives Canada.

André Biéler, the main organizer of the conference, is in the foreground. Behind him is Alma Duncan (in white), and the woman beside her may be Dorothy Stevens. In the third row on the left is Miller Brittain; beside him is Walter Abell.

with a vision of art and democracy in ancient Greece and in small pre-industrial societies. US Depression-era federal art programs, much talked about in Canada, were his great example of a contemporary solution.¹⁹ I have included below the part of the speech that defined the notion of a new cultural order: a future in which the gap between art and society is closed.

The artists at the conference, especially those chosen to lead the immediately formed Federation of Canadian Artists, hoped very much that the government would enlist visual artists in the war. They wanted a war records program something like the First World War version in which more than a hundred artists were hired. They wanted to make official wartime propaganda. They wanted the government to recognize artists' potential to contribute. And the government certainly might have, given its habit of following the British lead. In England, National Gallery director Sir Kenneth Clark had gone to the Treasury on the very first day of the war and proposed a War Artists' Advisory Committee to be placed under the British Ministry of Information, and within two months, in November 1939, the committee was established. Soon it was both sending artists to the front and deploying them at home, and by 1941 their work was being shown throughout Britain and abroad. Other more or less official British initiatives were taken, the most successful of which was the Central Institute of Art and Design, which acted as a wartime employment clearinghouse for artists and designers.²⁰ Canadian artists were very well aware of all this, and in fact the *Britain at War* exhibition showed at the National Gallery from 14 November 1941 to 6 May 1942. *Maritime Art* magazine printed a statement from the National Gallery pointing out that "every other British Dominion has followed the example of the United Kingdom and is employing its best artists in recording the history-making deeds of its fighting forces."²¹ But the Canadian government evidently concluded that programs for artists might deliver nothing more than paintings sitting in a gallery, and "modern" paintings at that.²²

Not that the government was opposed to the idea of visual propaganda. In fact, it was about to become a world leader in the field – but not by going to the artists. Instead, it undertook an amazing project under the command of John Grierson, leader of the British documentary film movement, who had come over in 1938 to advise Ottawa on the centralization and strengthening of its film production and distribution.²³ He also had a broader assignment from Britain's Imperial Relations Trust: to report on filmmaking in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia and to establish film centres in those countries, building a propaganda base for Britain to exploit in the now-inevitable war.²⁴ Grierson naturally concluded that Canada needed a central film agency. He devised a plan, legislation was passed, and the National Film Board was born in spring 1939, with Grierson in charge of a half-dozen staff. By the end of the year, the NFB had already started producing *Canada Carries On*, a monthly series on domestic aspects of the war for theatrical release in Canada.²⁵

The NFB was driven by the “documentary idea,” developed by John Grierson and his British colleagues in the thirties as a method for discovering significant patterns in everyday life and deploying those patterns creatively in film. Grierson believed this idea would make NFB films even more powerful than Nazi propaganda, and that was precisely his aim. To him, Hitler was “the greatest master of scientific propaganda in our time.”²⁶ Outdoing Hitler at the NFB would have a global effect: it would unite Canadian and international will behind the Allied war effort. At the same time, propaganda could serve as “the part of democratic education which the educators forget,” a way to “make the life of the citizen more ardent and satisfactory to himself,” giving each person a more real and vivid sense of community and country and of their future in a complex and connected world.²⁷

In spring 1941 the NFB took over the government’s old Motion Picture Bureau together with its staff and its aging but complete production facilities, all housed in an old two-storey lumber mill beside the Ottawa River. This brought the NFB complement to fifty-five and put it in charge not only of planning and advising on all government filmmaking but also of making or contracting out all government films.²⁸ As Graham McInnes wrote long afterwards, John Grierson was “sitting on top of a goldmine of propaganda, and he knew it. Within less than a year the old lumber mill would begin to attract film makers from all over the western world,”²⁹ and the NFB, that “new and cheeky little nation-state,”³⁰ expanded as fast as did Canada’s armed forces and munitions manufacturing.

Grierson was given an incredibly free hand in carrying out his vision. He was a magnetic, articulate, dictatorial leader, and he grabbed more and more young Canadian talent and trained them under veteran filmmakers brought in from England and the US.³¹ That young talent included Canadian writers such as P.K. Page and Mavis Gallant,³² and it included Graham McInnes, who became a producer and director, and then wartime director of public relations. McInnes virtually abandoned art criticism except for his *Saturday Night* art column, which he kept up only into 1941. He commented that it was really something to feel “that you were wanted; that your own particular skill was valid and needed; that you could make a contribution.”³³ Another of Grierson’s picks was Donald Buchanan, the critic, biographer of Morrice, friend and supporter of David Milne, founder of the National Film Society of Canada, and more recently Supervisor of Talks for the CBC. Once at the NFB, Buchanan began organizing a Canadian regional film distribution network for schools, town halls, churches, trade union halls, and factories.³⁴ New subjects sometimes grew out of discussions with local audiences. According to the filmmaker Evelyn Spice Cherry, co-director of the agricultural films unit, “the film ideas came in and then we sat and talked about how we could do it.”³⁵ By the end of 1941, that distribution network reached nearly a quarter of a million people each month, and it kept expanding. Artists outside the NFB in pursuit of a new cultural order could only dream of such a network uniting art and society.



Fig. 6.6 Left

Alex Colville, *Give Us the Ships*, 1941. Broadside. Offset lithograph, 95.1 × 65.0 cm (image). Issued by the Wartime Information Board. Image courtesy of the Toronto Public Library. Thanks to A.C. Fine Art Inc.

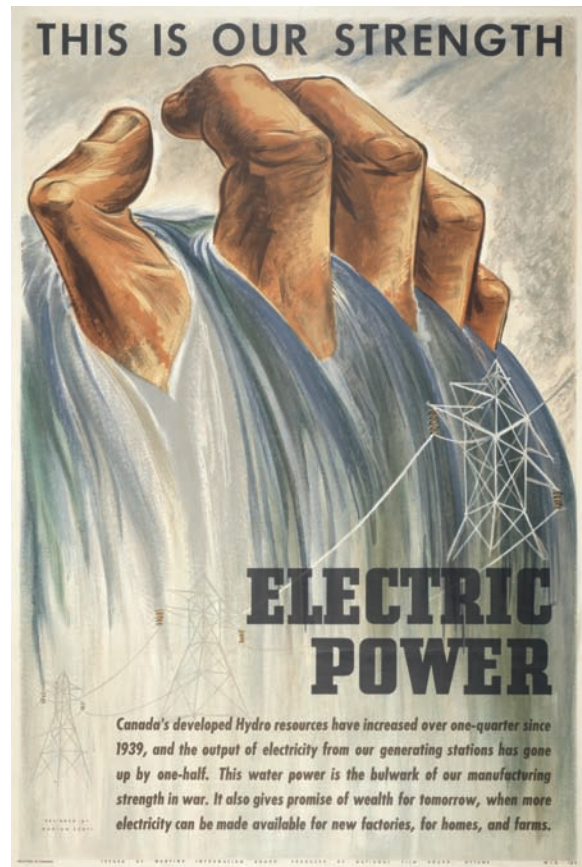
Colville was a third-year student at Mount Allison University when he designed this poster. The *Montreal Standard* noted under a photograph of it that “shipyards received this poster a month ago from the Wartime Information Board” (*The Standard* [Montreal], 2 January 1942).

Fig. 6.7 Right

Marian Scott, *This Is Our Strength: Electric Power*, 1945. Broadside. Offset lithograph, 91 × 61 cm. Issued by the Wartime Information Board. Image courtesy of the Toronto Public Library.

The Wartime Information Board commissioned the poster series “This Is Our Strength” to help maintain into peacetime the momentum that Canadian industry had built up during the war.

The NFB’s theatrical production doubled in 1942 with *World in Action*, a monthly series on international affairs that played successfully in the US and several other countries. That year alone 150 NFB films came out,³⁶ and now the NFB employed almost three hundred people. In 1943, the NFB swallowed up the graphics division of the Wartime Information Board, making it the first organization to “apply the documentary idea not only to motion pictures, but, under a centrally effective policy, to film strips, still photographs, displays, posters, wall hangers, cartoons and government publications as well.”³⁷



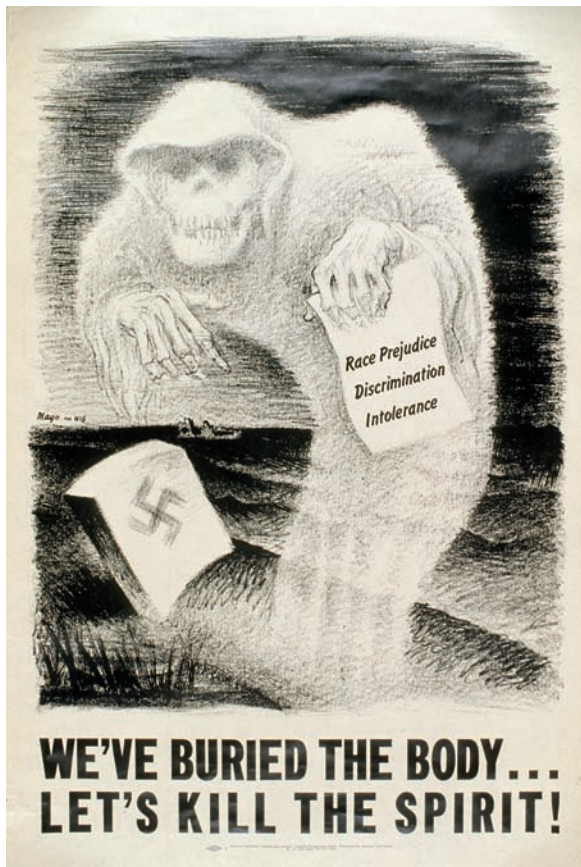


Fig. 6.8

Harry Mayerovitch, *We've Buried the Body ... Let's Kill the Spirit!* Poster issued by Wartime Information Board, 1944–45. C115708k, Library and Archives Canada, accession number 1981-32-8. Source: Harry Mayerovitch, Montreal, Quebec.

The NFB had its weaknesses. It was deeply anglophone, and although it hired some French Canadians, its representations of francophone, Native, and other points of view were very inadequate. It failed too to deal with the difficult issues surrounding conscription, and to report on the August 1942 Dieppe Raid when a thousand Canadians were killed and two thousand captured.³⁸ But then, no propaganda organization would have done so. The NFB's mission was to beat Hitler at his own game, to show Canada its strength, and to convince people they were going to win, so that they *would* win.³⁹

Grierson argued publicly that aesthetics mattered little and could even sidetrack the viewer from the central issues. What mattered was getting the right material to the public the *moment* it was current. In “Documentary Idea, 1942” he actually wrote that documentary film is anti-aesthetic in essence. “The style comes out of the job,” and the job is to give people “a pattern of thought and feeling about highly complex and urgent events.” There is a strong difference here from the ideas of those artists and critics who wanted simply to make art more accessible and to build more connections to society.

But Grierson had a more complicated relationship to art and aesthetics than that, as the excerpt from “Documentary Idea” below reveals. He had a formalist side, especially when it came to editing. When interviewing people for NFB jobs

Grierson asked what books they had read and what paintings they had seen, not what their filmmaking experience was. He liked to hire artists. “Obviously,” according to Harry Mayerovitch, “what Grierson wanted was someone who would display some passion about what was involved,” and the passion of artists made them much better at propaganda than the ad agencies the government had been hiring.⁴⁰ Mayerovitch, the Montreal artist-architect and previously a loyal leftist contributor to the United Front magazine *New Frontier*, was called to Ottawa after Grierson saw one of his 1940 war paintings reproduced in a newspaper, “and an hour and a half later, I was appointed the art director for the stills division of the National Film Board.”⁴¹ He went on to design some of the most memorable posters made at the NFB and its Wartime Information Board, of which he became the artistic director.

Another artist, the animator Norman McLaren, was called to the NFB in 1941. McLaren’s experimental technique of drawing on film, which eventually led to world fame in animation, was used for such purposes as promoting war bonds and discouraging gossip that might help the enemy. Montreal artist Alma Duncan was drafted into the new Graphics Division in 1943 and put in charge of posters and of designing and illustrating publications. The printmaker Laurence Hyde joined the NFB in 1942, and went on to a postwar career in filmmaking. Painter Jean Palardy became an NFB director-cameraman for a time.⁴² Oscar Cahén, once released from a prisoner-of-war camp in Sherbrooke, Quebec, designed war graphics for the NFB. Ironically, some of these artists had gained the necessary skills for NFB propaganda jobs and other aspects of the war effort through their 1930s left-of-centre work in communicating ideologies and depicting current events. That work now seemed to belong to another age entirely.



Meanwhile, artists outside the NFB were still being stonewalled in their efforts to contribute officially. They were quite conscious of the NFB machine, including the Wartime Information Board, and of the resources it ate up. As a Montreal newspaper reported, “there is a strong tide of resentment rising in artistic circles against the War Information Board in Ottawa. Artists want to take a more active war role in their profession. Ottawa ignores them.”⁴³ When the Federation of Canadian Artists published its call for membership to “all Canadian artists, related art workers and interested laymen,” photographers and filmmakers were not mentioned.⁴⁴ In a special 1942 feature on “Canada at War” in *Maritime Art* magazine, Arthur Lismer commented that

it has been thought by some that the camera and the documentary movie are sufficient means of recording the actuality and incident of the present war. When there is an artist in selective recording behind the lens, such records

have a certain undeniable character, even nobility. But – the camera cannot record a people and the way they think. Camera pictures are pretty much alike in all countries and as made by all people. Most photography is only a half truth. There is little interpretation of war – only its events. Art alone can reveal, emotionally, spatially and with biting line and turgid colour, with satire and grandeur of composition, with poignancy, humour, graphically, and with convincing personality, all the many-faceted aspects of war.⁴⁵

André Biéler wrote that “drawings done by artists are much superior to photographs ... The drawing has been done by a process of elimination and exaggeration, a synthesis of a scene. It has therefore more potent value.”⁴⁶ Roland-H. Charlebois of the École des Beaux-Arts in Montreal said that a camera gives every object equal value, and it can only give a partial picture of a war scene; a painting can evoke atmosphere, emotion, the essential.⁴⁷ But these kinds of comments, appearing as they did in small and sympathetic publications, were powerless to change a national policy that was driving so aggressively in another direction.

The national executive of the Federation of Canadian Artists fought earnestly for an official war artists program, for a greater public role for art in national reconstruction policy, and for cultural community centres across the country.⁴⁸ The Federation sent F.B. Taylor with a delegation to Ottawa in early 1942 bearing a petition with a thousand signatures that implored the government to engage artists in the war effort. That turned out to be an embarrassment; no government official would meet with them. “From their point of view,” Taylor reported, “we’re still miles up in the sky fluffing about in a deplorably impractical manner. We’re a bunch of well meaning nuts who thus far have evidenced no tangible reason why we should be seriously considered.”⁴⁹ Toward the end of that year the government finally did begin commissioning war artists, but only after long lobbying by National Gallery officials and by the influential Vincent Massey as well as by the Federation. Over the next three years thirty-two artists were engaged, a modest number compared to the First World War records project (but the war artists are a separate story, well told by Laura Brandon and others).⁵⁰ As the tide turned in 1943 with Mussolini’s resignation and with Allied victories in North Africa and the Pacific, Ottawa’s propaganda machine gave a little more attention both to artists and to in-country affairs.

At this time, Walter Abell moved from the Maritimes to Ottawa to start Canada’s first national art magazine, *Canadian Art*, which contributed like its predecessor *Maritime Art* to what Sandra Paikowsky has described as the spread of “the notion of a discernible national cultural history that was continuing to evolve.”⁵¹ With a warm and eager tone, the magazine made efforts to bring together art and the people, as *Maritime Art* had done. Well-known professional artists offered technical articles on the various media for the benefit of the amateur. The magazine carried a review of a watercolour exhibition by the literary critic Northrop Frye, who remarked that

Fig. 6.9

Molly Lamb, *Private Margaret Hubbard*, 1943–44, from w110278, *the Personal War Records of Private Lamb*. Charcoal on wove paper, 30.5 × 45.6 cm. Molly Lamb Bobak and Bruno Bobak fonds/e011161122. © Library and Archives Canada. Reproduced with the permission of Library and Archives Canada.

Molly Lamb was one of the award winners in the *Canadian Army Art Exhibition*. While in the service she independently made a number of drawn portraits of members of the Canadian Women's Army Corps, beginning in 1942. She used a sensitive, studied approach for these portraits that differs greatly from the caricatures in her well-known diary of those years (an example is in the chapter on David Milne), and from most of the work she produced in 1945–46 as the only woman appointed to the Canadian War Records program.

Private Hubbard was a close friend of Lamb's, and when stationed in Hamilton, Ontario, the two sometimes visited Hubbard's home in a nearby city.



“water colour by its very nature is closer to the cultivated amateur than oil,” and that cultivated amateurs contribute to exhibitions such as this a necessary spirit of fun, an enlightened appreciation, and even some interesting paintings.⁵²

Canadian Art also reported on the “democratic” exhibitions that were appearing across the country. Quebec artist Jean-Paul Lemieux noted that paintings had been collected for a show in Quebec City’s workers’ district to “spread the appreciation of art among the working classes.”⁵³ The academic artist Leonard Brooks contributed an article about his watercolours of the Great Lakes shipping industry, which were hung at the Seaman’s Union in Toronto, and he expressed his pleasure at the appreciation the seamen showed for the pictures. “I think Rivera must feel that,” he said in an immodest reference to Diego Rivera’s famous automotive murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts.⁵⁴ A writer from Vancouver discussed the large open exhibition *British Columbia at Work* produced by the Labor Arts Guild,



Fig. 6.10

Robert Bruce, *On Your Own Time*, ca. 1943. Oil on paperboard, 53.2 × 65.9 cm. Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, G-86-34. Photographer: Ernest Mayer.

This painting introduced Walter Abell's article "Canadian Army Art Exhibition: An Editorial Review," *Canadian Art* 1, no. 4 (April–May 1944): 134. Lance Corporal Bruce, from Winnipeg, who won second prize in that exhibition, worked in the Canadian Army 1943–46 as a public relations staff artist. After the war he did freelance illustration for such publications as *Harper's* and *Maclean's*; he also taught art at universities, continued to paint, and remained active in Winnipeg's art community (Hughes, "Robert Bruce: His Life and Work," 9–17).

which had been formed in 1944 to align the arts, including commercial art, with organized labour "on the conviction that mutual stimulation would accrue."⁵⁵ Four of the show's six prizes went to trade union members.

Walter Abell wrote a long *Canadian Art* editorial about the *Canadian Army Art Exhibition* that opened at the National Gallery in spring 1944 and then toured the country. "Perhaps for the first time in the history of Canada, an official government

agency, in this case, the Army, has invited a cross-section of the Canadian people – the enlisted personnel – to draw and paint its reactions to a phase of contemporary life, to enter its work in a national competition, and to exhibit the results at the National Gallery. Such advances toward a national people's culture are among the most heartening by-products of a world at war in the cause of democracy.”⁵⁶ Abell hoped the show would set a precedent for peacetime, though he had to point out that the professional jury favoured “the modern trend” in awarding prizes, which went to Bruno Bobak, Robert Bruce, and Molly Lamb, all trained artists. This meant that “the average soldier and the average layman are both surprised to find the awards going to work of a type which, in some cases, they do not understand.”⁵⁷

Overall, *Canadian Art* did not favour “the modern trend” during the war. Walter Abell spoke up in one short piece for the abstracted drawings made by Fritz Brandtner of the war industry. “Lines, colours, spaces, interplay dynamically with each other and become a visual embodiment of the forces and tensions, the piston thrusts and hammer blows, of modern industry.”⁵⁸ But that piece was unusual. In general, the magazine reflected a prevailing wartime sense that you excluded the broader public by being too “modern,” and you couldn't achieve a new cultural order without the people on your side. This vision continued to underlie English Canadian writings even as victory began to be glimpsed.



“People feel that something is going to happen, and that there must be a sequel to war as exciting as the war,” said *Canadian Forum* writer Helen Kemp Frye, looking ahead in 1944,⁵⁹ and to her that something was the new cultural order, the integration of individual lives with the larger social body through the arts. But ultimately, this was a limiting vision for many artists, as Pegi Nicol MacLeod's report on her wartime activity, below, shows.

The National Film Board, or rather John Grierson, also had a clear vision of life after the war. Like the visions of Abell and his English Canadian colleagues in the arts, his was of a collective, anti-individualist future. “I would call the philosophy of individualism Romantic,” he wrote, “and say we have been on a spectacular romantic spree for four hundred years.”⁶⁰ But Grierson's was a global vision. Even while working to fulfill his mandate in Canada and maintaining deep loyalty to England, he was aggressively internationalist, and in the end that meant he was no longer welcome here.

Ultimately, the wartime spirit underlying the collective visions of a new cultural order didn't outlast the war. *Canadian Art* magazine, like the rest of the Canadian art establishment, ceased after the war to encourage the amateur. The Federation of Canadian Artists failed to become a national force, although it can be credited with having been among a coalition of sixteen arts societies that, led by Toronto sculptor and FCA member Elizabeth Wyn Wood, presented a superbly organized brief to

the 1944 House of Commons Reconstruction Committee, arguing for community cultural centres across the country and for other national initiatives.⁶¹ Walter Abell returned to the States and John Grierson to England. The contradictions that Abell saw in the *Canadian Army Art Exhibition* ebbed away as the issue of being too “modern” ceased to be an issue at all.

THE NEW CULTURAL ORDER: ARTISTS’ AND CRITICS’ WRITINGS

The writings for this chapter begin with the first part of Robert Ayre’s long review of the Contemporary Arts Society’s “Art of Our Day” exhibition, in which Ayre argues for an undogmatic perspective on art in wartime. This serves as something of a counterpart to the rhetoric of Walter Abell in his speech to the Kingston Conference – a powerful expression of the wartime urge toward collective action – and of John Grierson, who energetically summarizes his “documentary idea” in the following text.

These three texts are followed by excerpts from four artists’ statements published by World Affairs magazine in a series on Canadian artists that began in 1941. World Affairs was a Toronto current affairs magazine for schools, and stood out as unusual among English Canadian general interest periodicals for putting any kind of emphasis at all on art during the war. The magazine had 3,500 wartime subscribers,⁶² and each copy may have gone a long way within a school.

These artists’ statements represent a range of responses to living in wartime. Ernst Neumann gives an appealingly modest and direct glimpse of his life as an artist and of the shape of his career, until the last paragraph, when he talks about the effects of the war. He certainly belonged to the side of Canadian art that engaged with humanity, responding to what Louis Muhlstock astutely called the “atmosphere” of the moment.⁶³ The next artist, Miller Brittain, argues for deep study of one’s subject matter, and his ideas have some connection to Walter Abell’s theories on representation and form. The third artist, Frederick B. Taylor, writes of hard work, his own and that of the people in the wartime factories with whom he tried to build a rapport. Finally, Paraskeva Clark emphasizes, as she did in “Come Out From Behind the Pre-Cambrian Shield,” the need to get beyond wilderness painting. She offers an unusual and perhaps unique focus on training – not necessarily academic training, but simply learning to paint humanity, a practice for which the landscape painters of English Canada were mostly unprepared.

The last text in the chapter is a lively report by Pegi Nicol MacLeod, who got a special assignment from the National Gallery to document the work of women in the armed services. Writing in her syncopated, self-conscious style, she addresses not only the servicewomen’s work but the complex issues of representation that she had to face as a wartime artist painting for the future as well as the present.

Robert Ayre, from "Exhibition of 'Art of Our Day' by Contemporary Arts Society Found Haunting and Significant," 1940*

A journalist and writer in many fields, Robert Ayre published almost two thousand articles during the course of his career.⁶⁴ His most important contribution to art criticism was through his columns in the Montreal Gazette and the Standard from 1935 to 1942, in which he balanced a concern for the place of art in society against attention to the formal elements of a work of art.⁶⁵

Our Day is, of course, Now: 1940. The dominating fact, in Canada, as everywhere else, Today, is War. It hasn't come to us in bombs; St. Catherine Street is unbroken; the tower of Toronto's City Hall still stands; but it is changing our habits, it is eating into our minds like a corrosive acid. Our Day, then, is a time of change, of grave anxiety, of nightmare.

The next question I ask myself is, how much of this has found its way into our painting? The exhibition gives us part of the answer. Not the whole answer because, good as it is, representative, as it is, it is not a complete roundup of contemporary Canadian art. Yet it does set out to show us what Canadian painters are doing in 1940 and it goes far enough to make our question a fair one.

How much of the nightmare of War, how much of the essential Now, has found its way into our painting? The answer on these walls is, "Not much." It is, almost, "None."

I am not saying our painters should paint the War; I am not saying they could if they wished; I am merely pointing out the fact that they are not doing it. If the upshot of it is that Our Day for them is Yesterday, we cannot condemn them. War changes things too quickly for most of us. It makes Today Yesterday in the twinkling of an eye. Art is of slow growth. It lives its own life, not necessarily in a vacuum, but it does not take the world neat at a gulp. When it does try to be "contemporary," as often as not it succeeds only in being false.

War's Influences

The war is disturbing our Canadian painters. Some of them, with no time and energy to spare, have gone into military training; others have given up painting entirely for active service; many – even those whose talent is unfitted for that sort of thing – feel they should be doing War posters; some feel they should be painting the War and are frustrated; others have put their uneasiness aside and are digging into their own work more intensively; and a few simply can't work at all. In time, and especially if it comes closer home, the War may yet get onto Canadian canvases.

* Robert Ayre, from "Exhibition of 'Art of our Day' by Contemporary Arts Society Found Haunting and Significant," *The Standard* (Montreal), 7 December 1940.

If it must, it will. If it does, it will not necessarily be in the surface things. Would Ethel Seath's shells be any more valid if they were the other kind of shells, the lethal ones. Would Philip Surrey's little procession be a richer experience if the figures were soldiers instead of schoolgirls? Or Miller Brittain's rummage sale more pointed if we knew it was for the Red Cross? The War is deeper than its properties. It need not show itself in war paintings at all. It will show itself in a changed temper, a different spirit. We may not see Today until Tomorrow.

So I do not find fault with the exhibition for not reflecting the immediate disaster.

We must, then, compare the "Art of our Day in Canada" with the "Art of Yesterday in Canada." We can't be too strictly chronological. There are painters painting today – young ones, too – who are painting like Yesterday, or even the Day Before Yesterday. It is a matter of spirit.

Reflections and Trends

What was Yesterday? I think we may take the Group of Seven for Yesterday. It was a grand time, a big, dramatic, heroic, if you like extravagant, optimistic time. Looking at the current show, which is largely Montreal, with European importations, we must remember that the Group of Seven was centred in Ontario. Montreal was never so exuberant; it has been closer to the studio than to the great outdoors. At any rate, Today is not so sure of itself as Yesterday was. It turns inwards, it applies itself to more heart-searching and to more searching, perhaps, after the secrets of painting. In a sense, it has narrowed down, become intimate and personal. In another sense, it has broadened and deepened, going into humanity instead of into the woods.

Walter Abell, from "Art and Democracy," 1941*

Maritime Art magazine had first appeared the previous October in Halifax. Abell, who edited it, stated that its goals were to reconnect art with citizens' daily lives, to make art affordable (original artists' prints were included with each twenty-five-cent issue), to encourage all kinds of creativity, and to encourage amateurs by presenting art as neither traditional nor modern, neither fine nor applied.⁶⁶ Like the art department at Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, where Abell taught, the magazine was underwritten by the Carnegie Corporation, which, as art historian Kirk Niergarth has pointed out, considered Atlantic Canada to be much in need of cultural support.⁶⁷ In his thoughtful study of Abell's work in Canada, Niergarth concluded that while such interventions by the corporation ultimately contributed to the centralizing and bureaucratizing of Canadian culture, Abell himself worked

* Walter Abell, from "Art and Democracy," *Maritime Art* 2, no. 1 (October-November 1941), 8–12.

hard toward the opposite end – grassroots participation and community-based art.⁶⁸ But with this speech, Abell was trying to shape a new national vision.

Today we seem to stand at the transition between two cultural epochs: a disrupted and autocratic one receding, an integrated and democratic one rising to replace it. Signs of a new order can everywhere be discerned about us. The modern world has experienced a new enthusiasm for primitive and folk arts, despised for centuries; an enthusiasm which indicates a returning sympathy for community cultures. Our museums, formerly lost in delusions of grandeur, now feel upon their consciences the demands and the opportunities for democratic service, and grope their way toward functions which will justify them to the new order. Collecting no longer forms their sole responsibility. Furthermore a new industrial art is beginning to emerge, giving the artist a place in meeting the needs of modern society, and bringing a new beauty into objects made for daily use.

If anything further were needed to complete our vision of the new cultural order, it emerges triumphantly in the recent development of government patronage in the United States. Interestingly enough, and in the light of the facts suggested above, naturally enough, it took a depression to bring such a patronage to active life. Only when our economic system lay stricken of its recurrent fever, with industry and people alike calling to the government for help, was the plutocratic mould so far broken as to permit the emergence of cultural forces hitherto repressed. In a decade of economic breakdown, working chiefly with limited relief budgets, government agencies such as the Federal Art Project and the Section of Fine Arts of the Public Buildings Administration, have done more to break the ground for a genuine culture of democracy than “normal” agencies had done in the preceding century. All those things neglected in the headstrong richness of prosperity were now suddenly undertaken in the midst of depression because the artist had to be included among those receiving relief and his services might as well be used!

The result was a veritable uprush of cultural democracy. Now came America’s first real effort at slum clearance and decent low-cost housing. Now, within the short space of six years, from workers of the Federal Art Project alone, came fifteen hundred murals for public buildings across the country, forty-two hundred works of sculpture and ceramic decoration, fifty-two thousand original oils and watercolors to be loaned to schools and other community institutions. Now came eighty-six community art centers in which eight million Americans have participated in artistic activities. Now came a score of other interesting developments the visible results of which may be increasingly observed throughout the country. And what has been the public good has also been the artist’s gain. Without considering material assistance, many an artist has received from federal activities his first real chance to be a part of something bigger than himself. Here for the first time he has felt society behind him.

In the light of all these recent developments, the dream of a modern democratic culture, which at one time had seemed a lost hope, lives again. Its ultimate realization is still far from certain, for there are many forces both at home and abroad which oppose it, but it has at least a prospect and a fighting chance. The cultural task, and the cultural opportunity, of this generation in Canada is to join the world effort toward cultural democracy and to see that such forward movements as have recently happened in the United States are made to happen here.

How can we go about it? I shall not attempt to answer that question in full, for it can only be answered after long thought and study on the part of all of us, but I will at least suggest two possible elements of a program. First, I do not think we shall get very far unless we develop some sort of group power through organization. Hence I hope that out of this conference will arise a permanent federation of the artists and other creative workers of Canada. Secondly, we need to define our aims and to find the means of attaining them, and this is a complex matter. It cannot be done in a moment. I would suggest that we map out a program of study to extend over a period of years and that study groups be formed in all parts of the country to investigate cultural conditions in their own localities and to formulate plans for new cultural developments.

When the war is over there will be a great opportunity for cultural reconstruction. Unless we prepare for it in advance, we cannot hope to play a vital part in it. If we have a significant program ready when the time comes, we shall be able to help guide the cultural evolution of the nation when guidance is needed. We feel very inadequate for such a task, yet if we, as the creative workers of the country cannot accomplish it, who can? Somehow we have to get the vision of the thing, and then we have to get the power of the thing. The people depend upon us. Perhaps if we put ourselves in line with the great democratic forces of our time, they may lift us up and give us the power required to do the job ahead.

John Grierson, from “Documentary Idea, 1942”*

The original editor’s note with Grierson’s article explained that it was “a slightly altered version of a letter from John Grierson to a member of the English Documentary Film Group,” whose newsletter had carried the article earlier in the year.⁶⁹ Most of the article is actually about British documentary; this excerpt includes only the part most relevant to the National Film Board.

Grierson published this in the Manitoba Arts Review, produced by the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. Why did he choose a small in-house periodical that was otherwise dedicated to academic writing, even during the war? Grierson had professional contacts in Winnipeg and perhaps some link to the journal may be found among them.

* John Grierson, from “Documentary Idea, 1942,” *Manitoba Arts Review* 3, no. 2 (fall 1942): 5–15. Reproduced with the permission of the John Grierson Archive, University of Stirling, Scotland.

Fig. 6.11

Harry Mayerovitch, *John Grierson*, ca. 1941–45, 42 × 27.6 cm (support). Harry Mayerovitch fonds, e011184535, Library and Archives Canada.

On the back of this caricature is a typed note: "Canada's Film Board Commissioner John Grierson does his work with the aid of cigarettes and telephones."



The first part of our work in Canada is done. They have a film organisation now that will do great things for the country if they look after it in good faith till the young people develop. Much of it has been pulled off the sky. On the other hand, there are special reasons why the national use of films should have fitted so quickly and progressively into the Canadian scene. The need to achieve unity in a country of many geographical and psychological distances is only one of them and not the most important. More vital, I think, is the fact that Canada is waking up to her place in the world, and is conscious, as English-speaking countries do not seem sufficiently to be, that it is a new sort of place in the world. A medium which tries to explain the shape of events and to create loyalties in relation to the developing scene is welcome. I cannot otherwise explain the measure of support we have been given, nor particularly the long-range hopes that have been placed in this school of projection we have set up.

The policy behind it I think you know fairly well. We are concerned primarily with the relation of local strategies to larger world ones. This is partly because of the dangerous parochialism in much English-speaking propaganda: but also because Canada is moving as swiftly toward a world viewpoint as England in recent years has been moving away from it.

The style comes out of the job. Since it is a question of giving people a pattern of thought and feeling about highly complex and urgent events, we give it as well as we know, with a minimum of dawdling over how some poor darling happens to react to something or other. This is one time, we say, when history doesn't give a good goddam who is being the manly little fellow in adversity and is only con-

cerned with the designs for living and dying that will actually and in fact shape the future. If our stuff pretends to be certain it's because people need certainty. If our maps look upside down, it's because it is time people saw things in relativity. If we bang them out one a fortnight and no misses, instead of sitting six months on our fannies cuddling them to sweet smotheroo, it's because a lot of bravos in Russia and Japan and Germany are banging out things too and we'd maybe better learn how, in time. If the manner is objective and hard, it's because we believe the next phase of human development needs that kind of mental approach. After all, there is no danger of the humanitarian tradition perishing while the old are left alive to feel sorry for themselves and make 'beautiful' pictures about it. Sad to say, the beating heart of the Stuarts was all they had left; and so it is with vanishing polities.

The penalty of realism is that it is about reality and has to bother for ever not about being 'beautiful' but about being right. It means a stalwart effort these days: one has to chill the mind to what, in the vacuum of daydreams, one might normally admire. In our world, it is specially necessary these days to guard against the aesthetic argument. It is plausible and apt to get under the defences of any maker in any medium. But, of course, it is the dear bright-eyed old enemy, and by this time we know it very well. Documentary was from the beginning an anti-aesthetic movement.

What confuses the history is that we had always the good sense to use the aesthetes. We did so because we liked them and because we needed them. It was, paradoxically, with the first-rate aesthetic help of people like Flaherty and Cavalcanti* that we mastered the techniques necessary for our quite unaesthetic purpose. That purpose was plain and was written about often enough. We were concerned not with the category of "purposiveness without purpose" but with the other category beyond, which used to be called teleological. *We were reformers open and avowed: concerned – to use the old jargon – with "bringing alive the new materials of citizenship," "crystallising sentiments" and creating those "new loyalties from which a progressive civic will might derive."* Take that away and I'd be hard put to it to say what I have been working for these past fifteen years. What, of course, made documentary successful as a movement was that in a decade of spiritual weariness it reached out, almost alone among the media, toward the future. Obviously it was the public purpose within it which commanded government and other backing, the progressive social intention within it which secured the regard of the newspapers and people of good will everywhere, and the sense of a public cause to be served which kept its own people together.

* Robert J. Flaherty was a US-based documentary filmmaker who in 1922 made the famous film *Nanook of the North*, set in the Canadian Arctic. This has been called the first ever documentary (Grierson invented the term), and Grierson learned much from Flaherty. The Brazilian-born Alberto Cavalcanti made films both in France and in England, and was a colleague of Grierson in the British documentary movement.

These facts should have made it clear that the documentary idea was not basically a film idea at all, and the film treatment it inspired, only an incidental aspect of it. The medium happened to be the most convenient and most exciting available to us. The idea itself, on the other hand, was a new idea for public education, its underlying concept that the world was in a phase of drastic change affecting every manner of thought and practice, and the public comprehension of the nature of that change vital. There it is, exploratory, experimental and stumbling, in the films themselves: from the dramatization of the workman and his daily drag to the dramatization of modern organisation and the new corporate elements in society and to the dramatization of social problems: each a step in the attempt to understand the stubborn raw material of our modern citizenship and wake the heart and the will to their mastery. Where we stopped short was that, with equal deliberation, we refused to specify what political agency should carry out that will, or to associate ourselves with any one of them. Our job specifically was to wake the heart and the will: it was for the political parties to make before the people their own case for leadership [...]

So the long windy openings are out, and so are the cathartic finishes in which a good, brave, tearful, self-congratulatory and useless time has been had by all. The box-office – pander to what is lazy, weak, reactionary, vicarious, sentimental and essentially defeatist in all of us – will, of course, instinctively howl for them. It will want to make ‘relaxation,’ if you please, even out of war. But don’t, for God’s sake, give it. Deep down, the people want to be fired to tougher ways of thought and feeling and to have their present braveries extended to the very roots of their social existence. In that habit they will win more than a war.

Ernst Neumann, “Some Ideas on Painting,” 1942*

A good painting is, I think, the expression of a point of view – a way of looking at the world. The artist sees in life some quality that particularly interests him, – some quality of colour, of form or of light and shade; and he paints his picture in such a way as to accentuate this quality. Rubens, for example, stresses in his pictures the richness, the fullness of nature in form and colour; Daumier emphasizes the three-dimensional quality in nature by constructing figures and objects as solid as monuments; Monet shows us the flickering, brilliant quality of light; Rembrandt develops the dramatic possibilities that lie in the contrasts of light and shade, and so on. Each artist makes us conscious of the particular quality he wants to emphasize by toning down, by eliminating all other qualities, for art is selection; a picture cannot be everything at once; if an artist tries to say everything, he says nothing. But if an artist says one thing well, – if he concentrates

* Ernst Neumann, “Some Ideas on Painting,” *World Affairs* 7, no. 9 (May 1942): 16.

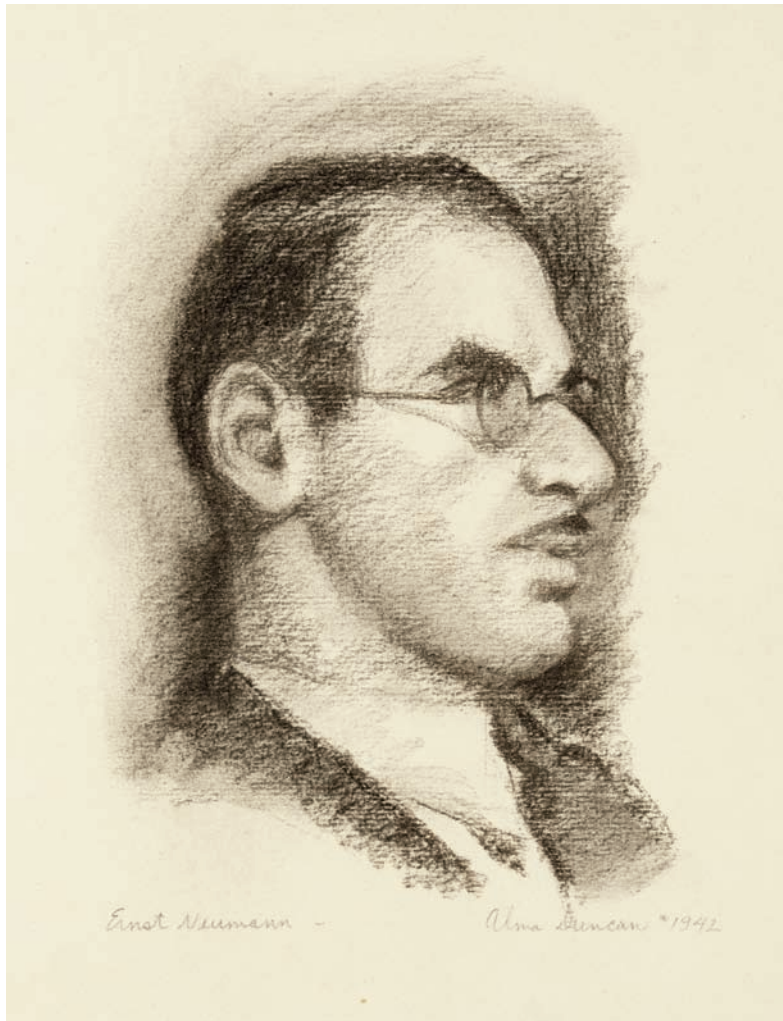


Fig. 6.12

Alma Duncan, *Ernst Neumann*, 1942.
Charcoal on paper, 35.2 × 27.4 cm.
The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa,
Ontario. Gift of the artist, 1985. Image
courtesy of the Robert McLaughlin Gallery.

on showing us one thing clearly, – then he trains our eyes to see it too; – he helps us to see qualities we did not see before; – he makes us conscious of new elements of reality.

For my own part, my eyes have been trained mainly by the works of Rembrandt and Goya. When I was about twelve years old, I went for the first time to the Art Gallery here in Montreal; and of all the pictures there I was most fascinated by a little portrait by Goya. And I still am ... When I go to the gallery today, I still stand before the same picture with the same admiration.

Like Rembrandt's, Goya's work depends not so much on contrast of colour as on gradations of tone, from light to dark. Both of these artists concentrated on the infinite variety, drama and mystery which can be got out of the use of light and shade, – which result from the contrast between those parts which stand out

clearly and sharply in strong light and those parts which sink away and are lost in half-light and shadow. And both artists, – though they painted everything – were greatly interested in human beings. They delighted in the differences of feature, attitude and expression which distinguish one person from another. In their pictures of men and women, they dwelt on these individual differences and did not try to create ideally beautiful figures, as did the ancient Greeks and the great Italians like Da Vinci and Michelangelo.

This inclination to seize upon individual character rather than to create ideally beautiful types is what, for better or worse, makes a man a portraitist rather than a painter of what used to be called “historical” pictures.

I have very much the portraitists’ temperament, so I naturally spend much time painting portraits professionally. In these – as in all my work – I try to get something of the qualities of the masters I have named as my chief influences, though with a use of colour based on more recent developments in painting. (To me, the development of greatest importance in the painting of the last hundred years is the painting *in* colour, the building up of form by means of colour itself, rather than the use of colour as an added accessory to pictures conceived in black and white.) I’d like to do pictures which are simple and direct, but have enough in them to be looked at for a while; pictures which are well-modelled and strong but not heavy; I want them to be flexible, supple, fine in workmanship but to have a grip, an incisiveness, a certain *bite*. I can’t define this last quality very well, I’m afraid. I mean by it the contrary of what is over-sweet and insipid.

Though portrait-painting always interests me and is my main activity in winter, it is at times, I must admit, a nerve-wracking occupation. There are sitters who wish to be flattered; and their notions of what is flattering are not mine. Their ideas of beauty, of how they would like to see themselves, seem to be formed on soft-drink billboards and such-like trivial stuff. On the other hand, there are clients who honestly appreciate my doing for them what I myself think best.

Still, the ideal occupation for any painter is, I should say, the painting of landscapes. There is nothing more agreeable than to set out on a fine day in the country with enough provisions, to camp where you please, to paint as you please, in the fresh air, in perfect quiet, to begin and stop when you like, to pack up your materials when the light fails, to examine your work in the evening and plan the next day’s operations. That is the way I usually spend my summers.

But in these days we cannot, even if we wish, go so far that the war is not with us. And the strain and pressure of the times are hardly conducive to the reflection and concentration that painting requires. We painters must look to an allied victory and to the re-establishment on earth of a form of society devoted to the arts of peace.



Fig. 6.13

Miller Brittain, *Self-Portrait*, as reproduced on page 16 of Pegi Nicol's article "Miller Brittain: Interpretation," *Maritime Art* 1, no. 4 (April 1941): 14–18. Whereabouts of original unknown.

Brittain is best known for the portraits and genre scenes he made in the few years before the war, representing the lives of the citizens of his home town, Saint John, New Brunswick, and while he rejected twentieth-century European art, these paintings are very individualistic and comment insistently on contemporary life. In the article featuring this self-portrait, the artist Pegi Nicol said wonderfully that the figures in one of Brittain's paintings are "complicated and modern. Just like all of us" (Nicol, "Miller Brittain," 14).

Miller Brittain, "Art To-day," 1942*

Brittain's reference to Mexican and US murals reflects a longing, often voiced and seldom satisfied, that English Canadian artists had felt since the thirties for mural commissions that would connect them to the public. Brittain himself had done a mural the previous year at the University of New Brunswick.

*This excerpt is preceded in Brittain's article by a quote from the 1893 book *The Problem of Form* by the German sculptor Adolf Hildebrand, which asserted that artists must not let such things as "subjective arbitrariness" get in the way of those "natural laws of Art" that lead to true reflections of nature. Brittain adapted the older text to fit a wartime urge toward drawing art and the people together.*

Brittain's crankiness here is most unusual among artists' writings of this period, and his comment about the "école de Paris" and its followers is especially surprising for a member of the Contemporary Arts Society, that home of francophiles in Montreal. What would his colleagues there have thought?

* Miller Brittain, "Art To-day," *World Affairs* 7, no. 8 (April 1942): 17–18.

To-day, we may surely feel that conscious expressionism or “subjective arbitrariness” is yielding before a tide that is the essence of life here and now, backed by the force of the ages. The frantic effort to be original at any cost, often at the cost of simple integrity, is on the ebb. Indeed the origins of this need for being different would be difficult to trace, although I suspect a certain type of highly successful art dealer may have had something to do with it. The flow of artistic concept from master to master in Europe was so gradual as to be almost imperceptible, yet what a company of great originals! On looking at Rubens’ drawings one asks, “Where does Michelangelo leave off and Rubens begin?,” yet their identities are not confused, nor the edges blurred.

The elimination of “personal caprice” has the certain effect of bringing art and the artist into the mainstream of life and into contact with all people who are really living and not merely existing as a water-logged connoisseur might be said to exist. The products of the “*école de Paris*” and their followers find a home among the fashionable, which in itself is a kind of judgment on them, but I look to the average intelligent Canadian to react in time to the new development. The mural enterprises in Mexico and the United States have undoubtedly done much to open the door to the public to the significance of artistic perception and one imagines it would be the best method for this country to follow.

As for the academic point of view, it has nothing to contribute, since it is geared in reverse. Here the student is subjected to a kind of tyranny where his work cannot be the realization of the natural development of the functions of seeing and knowing, but rather is it concocted piecemeal. There is a factual knowledge of form to which is added a factual knowledge of design artificially acquired. There is the outer shell of tradition but no living organism within.

If anything has come out of the welter of “isms” in art in the past years it had been the necessity for taking stock of ourselves and the consequent clarifying of our position. What is it all about anyway? For myself in the simplest terms, the task is to interpret life as I see it and know it. This involves the representation of the three dimensions in Nature on a two dimensional surface, the interpretation of solid forms in space on a flat plane, and the arrangement of those forms in the most satisfying and stimulating manner of which I am capable. As I am interested in my subject matter for its own sake and not merely for its shape and colour, I must know it thoroughly in all its aspects. Whether the emphasis be weighted in the direction of psychological or formal considerations depends on the personality of the artist. In Rembrandt, the former is stressed; in El Greco, the latter. Where the means seem subordinated to the result in the prints of Goya, Rembrandt and Daumier, the importance of the quality of line in Hogarth and Durer in no way robs them of power. All obey certain fundamental laws from their concept to their realization. It is these laws of art that must be at the core of any new unity of direction if it is to grow and last. Without them there is only added another “ism.”

Frederick B. Taylor, from “Painting War Production,” 1943*

According to a 1945 Wartime Information Board broadsheet, Frederick Taylor had for three years “devoted himself exclusively to painting and drawing Canada’s workers and machines turning out the weapons of victory,” and had depicted those workers in more than a hundred drawings and fifty paintings.⁷⁰ He made his industrial works to support the war effort, but also to support the trade unions. He organized at least one show of his own work for a Montreal union hall, describing the show in the press release as “an indication that organized labour is now able to devote itself to other than purely organizational and routine matters.”⁷¹ As chair of the Quebec Division of the Federation of Canadian Artists, he was likely the main force behind a Montreal meeting in which FCA members sat down with organized labour and employers to discuss closer ties between artists and industry.⁷²



Fig. 6.14

Frederick B. Taylor, *For Victory and After – Applying the Tracks*, 1942. Oil on canvas, 102.0 × 81.5 cm. 19710256-201, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum.

Taylor had studied early in his career with two hard-core Royal Canadian Academy painters, Edmond Dyonnet and Ernest Fosberry, and in his factory paintings he made use of that traditional training even as he addressed the most modern of subjects – the war industry. A small reproduction of this painting of workers attaching tracks to a tank accompanied Taylor’s *World Affairs* article.

* Frederick B. Taylor, from “Painting War Production,” *World Affairs* 8, no. 5 (January 1943): 17–18.

Painting in munitions shops is tough and I could not be called a “softie.” It is tough because of the sixth dimension which exists for me there. When I stand in a shop where several hundred people are working and endeavour to express my understanding of the meaning of it all, I am acutely conscious of a sixth dimension and this “thing” is distracting – as well as inspiring. I have boxed in Madison Square Garden before 15,000 people, I have been in high mountains and at sea under difficult conditions and in other circumstances felt alone and physically inconsequential, but painting in munitions shops is a more awesome and impressive experience. The fact that most shops are wide, long and high is but a minor factor contributing to this result. There is terrific noise, there are bad odours, there is movement and all this is constant for time is the duration. In addition there is the intangible, intensely real “something:” the thing that is the movement of the men and the machines, the din, and the intellectual and the spiritual as well as the physical force attending the movement and the din, is a psychological experience which I call “production.” I do not mean simply “purpose,” it is more than that.

Before the spring of 1941, in common with hundreds of thousands of others, I found it impossible to whole-heartedly support a war for the existence of the pre-war status quo, for the perpetuation of capitalistic so-called democracy was all that it seemed could result from victory until the U.S.S.R. was attacked and fought back. By the time the U.S.A. was attacked and fought back I had become anxious to support the war with all my ability. Before the war I specialized in painting, drawing and etching character studies and portraits and occasionally painted street and harbour scenes, landscapes and skiing subjects. In September 1939 I began offering my services in my professional capacity to the Government and subsequently I have continued to do so intermittently but without result. In December 1941 I began to increase the tempo of my endeavours to get my peculiar capabilities into the war effort and soon after that I took up the struggle on behalf of all the art workers of Canada towards the same end through activity in the Federation of Canadian Artists. Officialdom is, however, not sympathetic, so I took an individual line and decided to do what I could in a private capacity on my own. I did not begin painting “per se” until my thirtieth year and I am unwilling to abandon it and exchange my brush for a bayonet, for I believe that I can serve the cause of freedom better by painting than by wielding a bayonet. A full explanation of the difficulties I encountered in obtaining permission to begin to paint in munitions plants would be too lengthy, sufficient to say that when I began it was not an easy thing to arrange, and influence was necessary, but that has now been considerably corrected.

My original reason for wishing to do this particular work remains my prime object in doing it. I believe that the industrial part of Canada’s war effort is her greatest and the most important she can make and that the workers are in their respective ways, as important as the members of the armed forces and I wish to express my belief pictorially. My paintings inform the public and increase

their appreciation and consequently their admiration of and respect for industry's contribution. And, what is probably most important, they increase the workers' self-respect and pride in their service. In addition they constitute valuable general production publicity and war effort propaganda and are as well valuable war records.

We know what sailors, airmen and soldiers look like and we have been presented with a great deal of written, pictorial and photographic information about their work and how they look engaged in it. We know a good deal about ships, planes and guns and the lives of the men and women of the services in barracks and camps and something of conditions in action in the front line. As a result we can imagine more and we can sense the strain, the terror and the horror, the romance, the colour, the action and the noise of combat. We do not, however, know enough about the workers and their work. We haven't received enough information to be able to intelligently imagine the awful pressure, the danger and the action, the colour, the romance and the noise of their work, surroundings and working circumstances generally. We should have this information and the resulting ability to much more fully appreciate and so respect the contribution of the men and women of Canada's vast war industry. I can assist in this and in a forceful manner. There are few others able to do it in the same way, for not many painters in Canada are able to work at their own expense without prospect of early or eventual remuneration. Those who can should do it in this way now. In addition to all the other good which will result they will assist creative art workers as a whole to resume their proper place in the community. By their active concern in the affairs of society at large they will gain the recognition and the respected standing to which they are entitled and so be able to make the infinitely great contribution of which they are capable.

Paraskeva Clark, from "Thoughts on Canadian Painting," 1943*

In Canada, I feel, we painters suffer from lack of good training and our limitations in scope. Presently, war time exposes our hopeless unpreparedness and distress. We clamour for work, for murals, for posters, etc., and yet I doubt if one needs the fingers of both hands to count the artists that are able to cope adequately with these problems. However, this does not mean that I am against clamouring for work; on the contrary, in abundance of work, I see the only remedy to the present stagnation in wartime Canadian Art. There must be lots of work for the Army, for public buildings, for books. We must employ the greatest number of our artists and accept patiently the first awkward results of some of their work, so new to them. But in work, they will perfect their skill

* Paraskeva Clark, from "Thoughts on Canadian Painting," *World Affairs* 8, no. 6 (February 1943): 17-18.

in each successive step. Perfection comes out of practical exercise in every field of human activity.

But I would still like to emphasize that the road to the Renaissance in Canadian Art lies not only in “Jobs for Artists,” but in “artists better trained and better equipped for those jobs.” If our young artists could have a few years of guidance by some European or American master as a beginning, then many scholarships to go to other countries for the broadening of study and experience, we would have well supplied ranks of skilful, well-trained artists. Right now, in the face of an urgent demand to record “Canada at War” for posterity, I feel that we have a terrific shortage of artistic manpower. We are as unprepared for the job as were the democracies militarily and industrially unprepared at the start of the Nazi aggression.

We live in the epoch of realism, sharp issues, of necessity to take one side or the other, no middle course: there is just “Victory” or “Defeat.” We want to think only of the former and through the united effort of the allied nations, we shall have “Victory.” But it will require a great “unified” effort and determination for these allied nations to make this “Victory” a lasting, living reality. A complete brotherly co-operation, sincerity and straightforwardness in all relations, the desire to know and understand each other will have to flourish among the peoples of the world in order to build the peaceful life for which Victory is but a foundation.

Now, we see that Art is able to be a powerful force in war time in the service of the nation, as the agent of inspiration, teaching, criticism, chastisement, or glorification. But it has to be, of course, an art depicting the human being, human action, in order to produce in people’s minds and hearts the desired effect. And here is where Canadian Art in War-time should take its lesson. In our overgrown “pioneering” delight in our wilderness, we neglected the study of the “pioneer,” of the man. And we must not continue this sad mistake. The Post-War Art, if it wishes to be a strong, great, inspiring factor in the building of the new life, will have to be useful, clear, – human above all. Artists must study well the long neglected (and most difficult) subject, “the fellow man,” so that Canada will never again find itself lagging behind other countries in this respect.

The question of the education of the public and artists should be the paramount aim of the Federation of Canadian Artists.

Pegi Nicol MacLeod, “Recording the Women’s Services,” 1945*

The editor’s note for this piece read, “In the absence of any official provision for the commissioning of artists in the Women’s Services, the National Gallery last summer arranged for Pegi Nicol MacLeod to make a general study of their activities.”

* Pegi Nicol MacLeod, “Recording the Women’s Services” *Canadian Art* 2, no. 2 (December 1944–January 1945): 48–51.



Fig. 6.15

Pegi Nicol MacLeod, untitled painting, 1944. Oil on canvas, 57.4 × 78.2 cm. 19710261-5820, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum.

A reproduction of this painting accompanied Nicol's *Canadian Art* essay "Recording the Women's Services." Before taking on her assignment with the National Gallery to paint women in the armed forces, Pegi Nicol MacLeod had actively contributed works to events supporting refugees and to other wartime causes (Brandon, *Pegi by Herself*, 138–9). It is interesting, given all the talk of community centres within the Federation of Canadian Artists, that she and the artist Lucy Jarvis actually started and ran one, the Observatory Art Centre in Fredericton, New Brunswick, which she said served as "a nucleus from which we hope larger ones can grow" (Nicol MacLeod, quoted in the *Christian Science Monitor*; in Niergarth, "'What Would He Have Us Do?'" *Rethinking Professionalism*, 64).

The subject material of women in the services has pattern and colour suited to the needs of moderns. The faces recall Botticelli, or Murillo or even Leonardo and call for realistic treatment. Yet the pictures painted of them today are for their daughters also. This is another problem. Being documents, being history, they should be done in terms that will be understood by their children. I can't by any means suggest that I achieved the right style when I did my brief paragraphs in paint. It isn't easy when one is out of uniform to grasp the whole story of their lives. Only if all the women painters in Canada were to cover all the activities of all the Women's Divisions could this story be covered properly.

The artist who does this job must learn movement in unison, to see the effect of khaki against a group of autumn trees. A friend of mine feared the dullness of

khaki for painting. But they are live women inside these uniforms. Personal life is not submerged in khaki. It is sharpened and enhanced. Personalities are more vivid. Experience shared is ecstatic in happiness, softened in misfortune. Nearly every girl I met is married, with a man abroad or on the seas.

When we come to the kitchen and galleys where the foods are prepared for these war-changed girls, we arrive at a group of animated Brueghels. In the C.W.A.C. barracks, the colours were his, golden walls with scarlet trim setting off white aprons wrapped round husky figures, white coifs and aluminum kettles, and rosy khaki cotton for general duty uniforms. Then there was cerulean blue for W.R.C.N. stewards dealing with yard-square pans of stews and custards, baskets of cutlets, of sea salmon, silver and vermillion. All these colours I put down as best I could. Here in the galleys life was joyous with the girls singing, amazingly agreeable under their hanging pots and sieves.

Once I remarked upon the comfort of zippered overalls on a Britannia-like C.W.A.C., who was scraping cutlets and undoing hens in the chill of the refrigerator. She had been A.W.O.L. and was embarrassed by my congratulations, for the costume was a punishment.

"Salty" she said, when I started to draw my first young rating in the W.R.C.N. Her blond brush of hair stood up out of her starched collar. I asked what was the customary angle of the flat white pancake on her head. "Salty" she said and salty she was. Saucy they were, too, as they poured out of the navy building on Cartier Square in Ottawa. A sailor shoved a brood of them my way, where they mustered into a jumbo navy bus called "Block Buster." They were sweet, too, and that is true of all these girls.

Among painters, only a modern escapist could avoid being stimulated by the sight of a parade of the blue Dianas of the Air Force moving behind their leading Diana, she in turn behind a motorcycle policeman clearing a path through the traffic on a merchant street in Ottawa. What a subject for a Dufy painting! I could see Dufy taking a wide impasto of blue on his palette knife and making a broad band of it on his canvas, drawing into it the distinctive details and outline of the airwomen, with a varying background of sauntering civilians, slightly droopy, like zoot suits.

This was only one of many subjects. For example, those women of the W.R.C.N., moving across Connaught Place. With glittering eyes, sharp, smart and tall, three officers fling along in summer blue, three tricorns sailing across a sea of pavement, silhouetted against the distant bridge, dodging red tramcars and army jeeps, Goya-esque against an El Greco ground in a Raoul Dufy Ottawa.

The women in uniform is a chapter omitted from the painting being done by official artists for the Canadian War Records. It is unfair enough to leave out the mothers of soldiers, the nurses, the factory girls. What an obvious flaw to neglect also the women in the armed services.

The Automatistes, True Poets

7

An artistic avant-garde, according to the original meaning of the term in mid-nineteenth-century France, is not just an experimental movement. It is a movement based on the conviction that art can be an agent for change in the world. The historian Peter Bürger, who believes the original meaning of the term still holds, explains that “what is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men. When the avant-gardists demand that art become practical once again, they do not mean that the contents of works of art should be socially significant. The demand is not raised at the level of the contents of individual works. Rather, it directs itself to the way art functions in society.”¹ Every now and then during the history of art, an avant-garde in that sense arises and separates itself from the broader currents. In Canadian art, in a time of global and local trauma, this is what the Automatistes did, and as famous as the painters among them now are as pioneers of non-objective art in Quebec and Canada and as international pioneers of lyrical abstraction,² these artists decisively made a new role in the world for their work.

The Automatistes have been Canada’s most intensely studied artists, and first-rate scholars have devoted years to researching and writing their individual and collective histories.³ The Automatistes themselves wrote a great deal – they had a “*rapport privilégié*” with writing and reading, as a fascinating 1988 Bibliothèque Nationale du Québec exhibition catalogue put it⁴ – and their own writings, especially those of Paul-Émile Borduas, have been published in outstanding critical editions.⁵ Having studied this amazing body of writings by and about the Automatistes in relation to Bürger’s ideas, I offer this narrative together with a selection of documents to show how and in what circumstances they took on the role of an avant-garde.

As the Second World War ended, several of the young people who had grown close to Paul-Émile Borduas moved out into the larger world. They kept their connections with Montreal, with Borduas, and with each other vibrantly alive, travelling back and forth, writing letters, exchanging books. A Montreal–New York axis

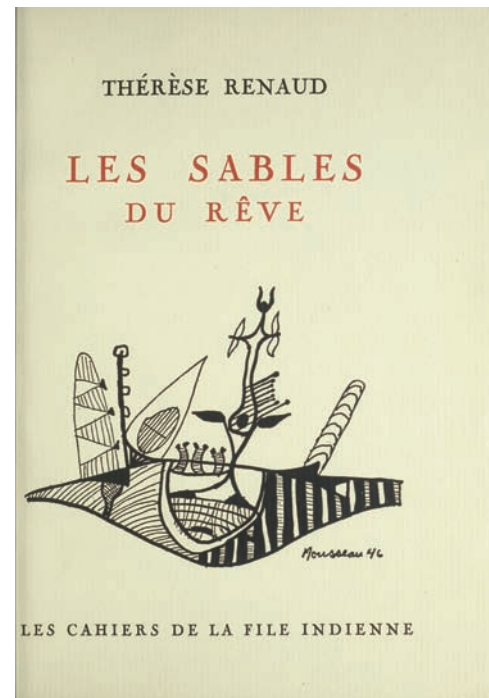
Fig. 7.1
Françoise Sullivan and
Jeanne Renaud (sister of
Louise and Thérèse) in New
York, probably 1946. Collec-
tion of Françoise Sullivan.
Photographer unknown.



Fig. 7.2

Thérèse Renaud, cover, *Les sables du rêve*, with drawing by Jean-Paul Mousseau. Montreal: Les Cahiers de la File Indienne, 1946. Reproduced with the kind permission of Isabelle Leduc. Drawing by Jean Paul Mousseau, © Succession Jean Paul Mousseau/SODRAC (2016).

Renaud explained many years later that she first learned about surrealist writing through her sister Louise, who was in New York and in contact with some of the French surrealists. In particular, Renaud found Paul Éluard's description of the earth as "blue as an orange" important for revealing to her that "it was possible to create a poetic image while expressing a counter-truth," and the poems in *Les sables du rêve* (*The Sands of Dream*) reflected through their "counter-truths" her pain at not fitting in with her bourgeois family and her convent education (Renaud, from a 1976 interview with Jean-Pierre Duquette, in *The Sands of Dream*, 38). The literary scholar Gregory Betts finds that Renaud's poems in their openness and their independence from surrealism "enact a kind of aesthetic purity" previously unseen in Canadian writing (Betts, *Avant-Garde Canadian Literature*, 165).



developed when dancer-painter Françoise Sullivan moved to New York, taking with her paintings by Borduas, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Fernand Leduc, Jean-Paul Mousseau, and Pierre Gauvreau. These she showed informally in January 1946 at the Franziska Boas studio, where she studied Balinese and Indian dance. Her friend Louise Renaud, also a highly trained dancer, had arrived in New York a year earlier and had a job that put her close to French immigré artists and intellectuals, including some of the surrealists. She sent back "books and the latest news from New York"⁶ – material on dance, music, theatre, visual arts, film, and everything contemporary that interested her.⁷

A second axis, Montreal–Paris, formed when Louise Renaud's sister Thérèse sailed to Paris in October 1946, immediately after launching her poetry book *Les sables du rêve*, Montreal's first automatist book. Fernand Leduc then left his Montreal teaching job to join her and marry her. Jean-Paul Riopelle and another of the group's dancers, Françoise Lespérance, married and they too moved to Paris, as did Guy Viau, who went to train for an eventual École du Meuble teaching position. It was a "petit Canada" for these and other acquaintances from Montreal.⁸

In fact, in the summer of 1946 Borduas himself considered moving to Paris and wrote about this to friends there, including Marie-Alain Couturier. He had differences with the director of the École du Meuble, and two of his three courses were given to a conservative instructor.

But he stayed on, while many of his young friends pursued their careers in Paris and New York. In those cities they found the books they were hungry for, and Fernand Leduc remarked that Thérèse Renaud spent an entire month in her room reading what she could not get in Montreal.⁹ They found cinema too; Pierre Elliott



Fig. 7.3
Thérèse Renaud and Fernand Leduc in Paris, summer 1947. Photographer unknown. Image: private collection.

Trudeau, an acquaintance also in Paris for a year, wrote of seeing the 1945 French film *Les enfants du paradis* and hearing soon afterward that Premier Duplessis had banned it in Quebec.¹⁰ They found ideas. Riopelle said in a brief 1947 interview, seen below, that Paris was so full of vital and rigorous thought that artists and authors had to defend every surrealist painting and automatist poem with an astonishing degree of logic, and “everyone reads, everyone discusses, even the superintendent of your building has something to teach you on the intellectual and political fronts.” In Paris and New York, these young people were making themselves into what Quebec in the Duplessis era was not, at least not openly.

Those of the group still in Montreal began to detach themselves from the city’s art scene, the younger painters feeling dissatisfied with the Contemporary Arts Society in spite of its exhibiting opportunities and its creation of a free junior category (that had no voting privileges).¹¹ In any case, what happened when the group met was so much more compelling. “We argued among ourselves and didn’t always agree; but all our relations were bathed in an atmosphere of fraternity, generosity, confidence, and even abandon that was absolutely incredible. We were young and ardent. I have never encountered anywhere else such human incandescence.”¹²

As they began to rely more exclusively on each other and on Borduas, and as their desire to advance and refine their ideas grew, writing became more and more important to them. Their critical and polemical texts constantly referred to surrealism; their agreements and disagreements were with it, and they made it clear that these were not just about art or literature, but much more. Remi-Paul Forgues, in his statement “Surrealism in Montreal,” expresses a desire for the fuller, freer experience of life that surrealism promised: a “superior reality.” He cites both André

Breton and Pierre Mabilille, a doctor and anthropologist associated with the Paris surrealists, on the importance of the unconscious in exploring a world not accessible through reason. Another of the group, Université de Montréal medical student Bruno Cormier, wrote “For Modern Thought” for the Université de Montréal student newspaper *Quartier Latin*, and there he used the idea from Mabilille’s book *Égrégories* that the decadent bourgeois civilization that had begun with Christianity was near death. Living art, *art vivant*, refuses decadence, he said, and brings on the new: it is “a sign of thought in motion.” It is easy to see what a liberating thing it was for the group to read Mabilille in Duplessis-era Quebec. In the writings of Mabilille and the French surrealists, the Borduas group found their link between art and the responsibility to lead – to be an avant-garde.

Directly or indirectly the group always advocated for the automatist process, which offered them the “hope of catching our most immediate and stringent desires.”¹³ Automatism had become their exclusive approach since Borduas began practising it the winter leading up to his 1942 exhibition of gouaches. Their dancing and painting and creative writing all flowed from the belief that to suppress the conscious rational mind was to allow those precious desires to emerge in all their authenticity, and this, if practised by enough people, could create wholeness in humanity. Mabilille had said that “to want to change a civilization profoundly by changing laws and forms is a widespread mistake. With civilizations, what works is that which touches the sensibility, creating new needs and new desires.”¹⁴

The group continued to study surrealist texts avidly. Fernand Leduc said later that “we were captivated, bewitched by surrealism”; it was “an opening into the marvelous, into mystery.”¹⁵ These young Montreal intellectuals became deeply committed to André Breton’s basic idea that “the liberation of the mind, the express aim of surrealism, demands as primary condition ... the liberation of man.”¹⁶ Though most of them would eventually reject surrealism, this idea remained central. Their relations to French surrealist ideas grew more and more nuanced, even though French surrealism itself had evolved into a web of conflicting factions and shifting political allegiances, and even though the Montreal group had little interest in French surrealist painting (“For us the accent on the authenticity of the works, for them the works in the service of their thought”).¹⁷ The theoretically minded Bruno Cormier and Fernand Leduc read everything they could about surrealism and about Freud, whose ideas lay behind surrealist thought.¹⁸ Borduas himself knew the French surrealist magazine *Minotaure* very well and admired André Breton greatly, especially Breton’s famous 1936 essay “Le château étoilé”;¹⁹ we know little of his broader reading habits, though Claude Gauvreau believed he may not have read much else of what Cormier and Leduc were devouring.²⁰ But everybody got a copy of Lautréamont’s *Chants de Maldoror*, according to Françoise Sullivan.^{*21}

* Lautréamont, resurrected by the French surrealists, was hugely celebrated in Paris, where three different editions of his complete works were published in 1938–39 (Houde, “Biblio-tableau,” 194–5).

By way of demonstrating the group's development of a single direction, the five painters whom Françoise Sullivan had shown in New York, together with Marcel Barbeau and Roger Fautoux, exhibited together in the Amherst Street apartment of the actor Muriel Guilbaut in April 1946. Leduc was pushing for a manifesto and for a journal of their own to allow the group to clarify its positions, to meet its "need to understand itself and to make other people understand the situation they were in, which affected all of society."²² Leduc wrote "All New Consciousness" as a sort of position paper "to dissipate the fog of legends that surround us." Had a journal by the group ever appeared, this piece would likely have introduced it. It speaks for a band of artists sure of their mission, a mission that far exceeds the Montreal art world, and he encourages an audience of the young to join them in abandoning the status quo in favour of spontaneity and a dynamic approach to life.

In November 1946, seven months after the Amherst Street exhibition, the same seven painters exhibited in the Contemporary Arts Society's eighth annual show. Their work ended up in the back room, but Claude Gauvreau, younger brother of Pierre, wrote in his polemic "Revolution at the Contemporary Art Society" that finally Canadian painting not only existed but surpassed the work of New York and Paris. And only in that back room: Gauvreau dismissed almost all the other works in the show as academic exercises or worse by so-called moderns.

The momentum continued to build. The seven exhibited together again in February 1947 at the Sherbrooke Street apartment of the mother of Pierre and Claude Gauvreau. More clearly now the Borduas group was a unit, and these seven were the core (though recently, Rose Marie Arbour, Patricia Smart, and others have questioned whether the painters rather than the dancers and writers had this centrality because they were male, or because the master Borduas was a painter, or both²³). Borduas wrote that the relative success of this latest exhibition demonstrated that "it is very important to continue the group shows in Montreal. This is a revolutionary act of the first order. A more and more numerous public is counting on us. That public is young and ardent and this is the only counterweight to all that oppresses them."²⁴ With such a focus on how their art functioned in society, especially for the young, they had taken on fully their role as an avant-garde.

Six of the seven showed again in Paris that summer at the Galérie du Luxembourg through the initiative of Thérèse Renaud.²⁵ In the wake of all these exhibitions, (ironically, there would never be another Automatiste show like them), the idea of a manifesto reappeared. The Paris surrealists had just published their manifesto *Rupture inaugurale* (signed by Riopelle, who exhibited with the surrealists, though Borduas and the others rejected such involvements). The Automatistes needed to show they were different, that theirs was "a virile and aggressive form of art" that was "legitimately characteristic of Canada,"²⁶ as Pierre Gauvreau said. Claude Gauvreau claimed they had developed an original "plastic" or "critical" or "inspired" automatism that involved, unlike other forms of automatism, a particular state of emotion or inspiration.²⁷ Their writings reveal their conviction that their practice of



automatism, even if they didn't agree fully on what it was, had gone beyond surrealism in its capacity to advance human understanding and to expand consciousness. It was precisely through this greater understanding of the human being that social problems will be resolved, Pierre Gauvreau said.²⁸ Their practice had become to them what French surrealism had been less than a decade earlier: the only path left open by the history of art.²⁹ That certainly merited a manifesto, and it explains their ennui at the sight of much of the art around them, including paintings by the happily eclectic Pellán and the rest of the Contemporary Arts Society. They also felt they needed to clarify their politics, especially since some of them had ties with Montreal communist circles and since the French surrealist manifesto had just denounced communism.³⁰ By the spring of 1948 the group was working on the eighth version of what would become the lead essay of *Refus global*.³¹

"The manifesto," said Fernand Leduc, "came out of the set of propositions and observations we made among ourselves, the questions posed about life and the conduct of life."³² In the first place, these questions naturally had to do with the regime in Quebec. At the time, the provincial government was harassing, without proof, individuals suspected of being communists, and Premier Duplessis had recently in-



Fig. 7.4 Opposite

Maurice Perron, *Exposition Mousseau-Riopelle chez Muriel Guilbault*, November 1947.

From left to right: Claude Gauvreau, Françoise Sullivan, Bruno M. Cormier, Jean-Paul Mousseau, Marcel Barbeau, Julien Major, and Muriel Guilbault. Musée National des Beaux-Arts du Québec. Reproduced with the kind permission of Line-Sylvie Perron.

Fig. 7.5 Above

Maurice Perron, *Seconde exposition des automatistes au 75 ouest, rue Sherbrooke, chez les Gauvreau*, 1947. Musée National des Beaux-Arts du Québec. Reproduced with the kind permission of Line-Sylvie Perron.

voked his own anti-communist law to shut down the labour newspaper *Combat* and other producers of “communist literature” (no legal definition given). Under his rule, government corruption and patronage reached new heights. Strikes were broken violently by his police forces, and the anglophone factory owners in question were pleased to help Duplessis build a monstrous campaign fund that helped him win the summer 1948 election.³³

Worse than this deplorable local situation – far worse – was the nuclear cloud on the global horizon and the possibility of an even more terrible world war than the one just ended. In the spring of 1948 Fernand Leduc wrote to Borduas that he and Thérèse had gone into the countryside for several days to get rid of the nervous tension brought on by international events and the dire news stories about them. “Organization of a ‘European bloc’ – for whom? Against whom? Threat in Czechoslovakia – in

Italy ... Benelux Conference – economic preparation, military conclusion ... Armament of France by the U.S. Supplementary vote by the U.S. for nuclear armament ... Et vive la Paix!”³⁴ The letters that Fernand Leduc and Paul-Émile Borduas exchanged in early 1948 took on this apocalyptic tone, tying the global crisis to Mabille’s prediction of the end of Christian civilization. Borduas: “Two world wars, and the possible terror of a third should be the *coup de grace* to this endless reign of conscious choice, of exploitive memory, of noxious intention.”³⁵

The Contemporary Arts Society had in the meantime collapsed after doomed efforts to create an entente between the Automatistes and a Pellan-centred alliance. Borduas broke off relations with his great ally Maurice Gagnon, and with John Lyman, whom Claude Gauvreau has still been able to praise in his “Revolution at the Contemporary Art Society.” Now the group in their intransigence was clearly isolated from what had been their main matrix of support. But they did not regret what they had lost. Their collaborations were closer than ever, for automatism generated not merely art forms but a transformative way of being for them. At a dance recital that spring of 1948, Françoise Sullivan and Jeanne Renaud (sister of Thérèse and Louise) performed an interpretation of a Thérèse Renaud poem read by Claude Gauvreau. Costumes were by Jean-Paul Mousseau; Jean-Paul Riopelle was the stage manager, and another group member, the brilliant photographer Maurice Perron, did the lighting. In short, though their alliance was fragile in so many ways, the Automatistes had each other. Jean-Paul Mousseau wrote later, “I would give thirty years of my life to go back to this time when we lived with Borduas ... for the purity, the emotion, the intensity of life that I experienced.”³⁶ Marcelle Ferron said, “When I encountered Borduas and the group – the atmosphere, it was a kind of family, a veritable world, it was the world, it was reality.”³⁷ For Françoise Sullivan, “It’s very strange, but there were seven magic years from 1941 to 1948 when it really existed, when it was getting stronger, and then it exploded.”³⁸

And it did explode, but first came *Refus global*, the Automatistes’ last collective act. They produced it in the home of the Gauvreau brothers, published it as an unbound and mimeographed collection of texts and images, and wrapped it in a Riopelle lithograph that incorporated a Claude Gauvreau poem. In appearance, it was an artists’ book with each copy numbered, reflecting the Automatistes’ pioneering role in text/image practice in Quebec³⁹ as well as their desire to show their current work, and, most importantly of course, their revolutionary ideas. A scholar recently remarked on seeing it in the original for the first time that “in many ways it’s a beautiful document as well, the photographs and the sketches in it add a completely different dimension.”⁴⁰ Its texts, in addition to Borduas’s lead essay “Refus global,” were his brief lexicon “Commentary on Some Current Words”; his essay “About Today’s Surrealism,” predictably assertive of the group’s differences from the French surrealists; three short dramatic texts by Claude Gauvreau; an essay on the work of art as “experiment and experience” by Bruno Cormier, who was about to begin his specialization in psychiatry; the essay “Dance and Hope” by Françoise

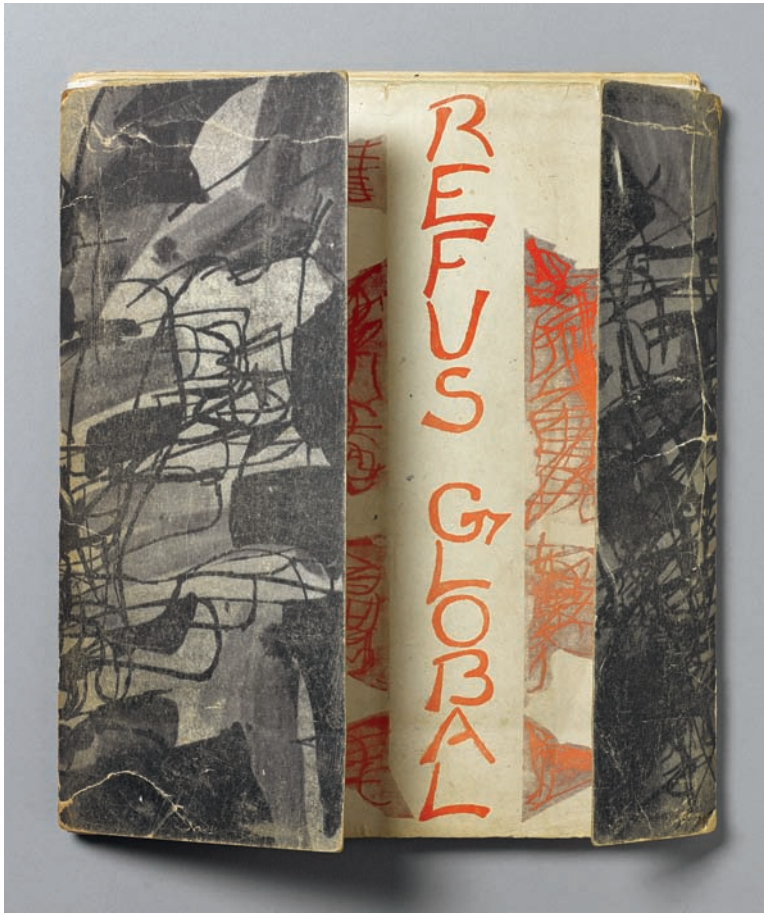


Fig. 7.6

Cover, *Refus global*, 9 August 1948. Montreal: Mithra-Mythe. 106 pages in various pagings: ill.; 22 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario, E.P. Taylor Research Library and Archives LA.115618.

Sullivan, who had become director of Montreal's Group de Danse Moderne; and the short but fiery polemic "Like It or Not ..." by Fernand Leduc, who together with Thérèse Renaud had signed the manifesto in Paris. Finally, and reflecting the group's diversity of medium, the manifesto included photos by Maurice Perron of the works of the Automatistes in their various disciplines. Fernande St-Martin remarked a decade later that *Refus global* was the sign of an "encounter, a community, a union," the first in Quebec, of people who, "refusing to entrench the individual behind the limited horizon of his specialty, aspired to construct a new definition of the human being in all his possibilities."⁴¹

On reading *Refus global*, the critic Charles Doyon, one of the Automatistes' best informed and most constant supporters over the years, was brave enough to say in print that "What many of us have felt in silence, what some rare precursors have dreamed of, what my generation has foreseen, has been revealed."⁴² But Doyon remained virtually alone among the critics in endorsing the manifesto publicly. Borduas's biographer François-Marc Gagnon remarked that there were more than a hundred responses in print to *Refus global* and Borduas's subsequent firing, and

the reaction to the manifesto was on the whole “not only negative but aggressive and reproving.”⁴³ The hoped-for support of the *chrétiens de gauche* who were Borduas’s friends in his own generation did not materialize. Borduas lost his teaching job at the École du Meuble a month later, and while he knew the director had wanted a pretext to fire him⁴⁴ it was still a huge blow, made worse by the subsequent cancelling of a retrospective exhibition he was to have had at the Université de Montréal. The media responded to his firing with only a weak defence, mostly by publishing some supportive articles by his circle.⁴⁵

The trouble was that even the sympathetic critics had simply not followed the Automatistes down the narrower and narrower path that led to *Refus global*. Like a few other liberal critics, Charles Doyon used the dismissal of Borduas from the École du Meuble as an opportunity to criticize the Duplessis government, but didn’t pursue it further, and Doyon continued to promote the broader range of Montreal *art vivant* artists, whom the Automatistes saw as mired in the past.

The fact that the lead essay of *Refus global* was a violent critique of the clerical-political elite in Quebec was of course the basis for the manifesto’s public rejection, but to its writers the local and the global were really a single thing reflecting the deadly excess of reason that had led to the Second World War and the possibility of an atomic war. Using Mabille’s concept of a once-vibrant but now dying Christian civilization, the manifesto’s lead essay declared, as if to will it into happening, that the reign of fear – of all the fears of people living in a repressive culture – was ending.⁴⁶ A new collective hope would be born out of the ruins left by the third world war. This now seems a mad dream of a utopia after the apocalypse, but it was a dream born out of their clear-eyed perceptions of the world around them, a world that assaulted their senses and intellect and creativity. Laying this bare in *Refus global*, the Automatistes provided a critique that nobody else dared make in Quebec.

The Automatistes had a shared faith as fierce as any religious faith, acquired through the practice of their arts and through their reading and discussions. In fact, Marcel Barbeau remarked that Borduas, “who made possible the consciousness that brought us all together,” was “a man of great faith. He didn’t believe in out-moded Catholicism any more, he saw that as fetishism, but he had rediscovered a kind of faith in the object, in human passion and the object.”⁴⁷ This faith required getting rid of the split between matter and spirit, between body and soul, and committing to “the moral importance of the un-preconceived act”⁴⁸ as a return to first principles. That was the one way for humanity to bypass the curse of the rational. This shared faith and its ethical consequences made the Automatistes unable to accept anything they saw as being done by halves, including the work of the Contemporary Arts Society. To them, only the generosity and spontaneity set into motion by automatism could create a force powerful enough to destroy obsolete civilizations and bring the new into being.

In 1825, a character in a book by the philosopher Henri de Saint-Simon declared that “It is we artists who will serve you as avant-garde ... the power of the

arts is in fact most immediate and most rapid: when we wish to spread new ideas among men, we inscribe them on marble or on canvas ... What a magnificent destiny for the arts is that of exercising a positive power over society, a true priestly function.”⁴⁹ This very early description of an artistic avant-garde could not define better what the Automatistes came to see as their duty in their own time – a duty for which they required words, for without *Refus global* and their other texts, their work and ideas would have been confined to the art world.

After the First World War, some, including the ethnologist Marius Barbeau, spoke of traditional Quebec culture as a treasure preserved unconsciously by rural folk for the regeneration of the race – a notion that, together with many other aspects of conservative nationalism, helped Duplessis and Quebec’s old guard to maintain power for so long. But Borduas and the Automatistes had long rejected that narrow idea of cultural treasure, which so easily slipped over towards racism and fascism. Ultimately, they refused alliance with any political body on the left or the right. Their practice as an avant-garde had a different character. At the moment of *Refus global* they spoke instead of a *trésor poétique*, an authenticity too high for political entanglements, that was preserved unconsciously in every human being.⁵⁰ Near the conclusion of the lead essay Borduas wrote, “A magnificent duty is ours: to preserve the precious treasure that has come to us ... This treasure is the poetic reserve, the emotional renewal from which future centuries will draw. It can only be transmitted by being transformed.” True poets, such as Lautréamont (still banned in Quebec), gave the world openings onto this powerful treasure. That understanding, said Fernand Leduc, was what Borduas gave his students. “He didn’t teach me how to paint, he taught me how to live. He taught me the approach every artist must take in making a work, and this necessarily opens onto fundamental freedom. It’s not about technique, it’s simply the discovery of one’s quality of being. And this is the essential goal, I think, of all creation: by that very fact, to attain poetry. Whether it’s architecture, sculpture, painting, music, the essential quality, I believe, is poetry,” and poetry is “direct communication with the other ... illumination.”⁵¹ The true poets of the day must take responsibility for the poetic treasure of humanity, must renew and add to it. Only that could transform the world. That was the Automatiste project.

THE AUTOMATISTES, TRUE POETS: ARTISTS’ AND CRITICS’ WRITINGS

As I noted, the Automatistes wrote and were written about a great deal, and the texts included here are merely a few of the most important. They reflect the increasing resoluteness and vibrancy of the Automatiste group.

First is the 1945 “Poem” by Thérèse Renaud. Quartier Latin, the audacious student newspaper of the Université de Montréal, printed this poem on its arts page above a drawing by Renaud’s friend Jean-Paul Mousseau. Below was “Surrealism

in Montreal" by Remi-Paul Forgues, which shows the future Automatistes' hunger for freedom as well as their interest in surrealist thought and the ideas of Pierre Mabille. Forgues reveals with particular clarity how their admiration for Borduas was drawing them together and creating a sense that they must no longer allow themselves to be "separated from the rest of the universe." His essay, seen next in this section, and Renaud's poem were the first publication of the writings of the future Automatistes.

Next comes Bruno Cormier's "For Modern Thought," also from Quartier Latin. Although Cormier still talks here about "living art," art vivant, which was ultimately too broad a concept for the Automatistes, he stresses like Forgues the need for a radical break from the past. He urges readers to take the risk of abandoning convention and morality, which are static, in favour of an ethics based on a dynamic, unfixed relation to the world. Cormier's piece is followed by Fernand Leduc's "All New Consciousness ..." Like Forgues and Cormier, Leduc advocates for a life of risk, free of static thought and in constant engagement with a world in movement. Although not often commented on by scholars, this emphasis on the rejection of every manifestation of the static is an aspect of the freedom so craved by the Borduas circle.

The following piece is Claude Gauvreau's flaming review of the eighth annual show of the Contemporary Arts Society. The article appeared just a few months before the March 1947 Sherbrooke Street exhibition, at a point when the group was as cohesive as it ever would be. In Gauvreau's eyes they had reached a collective triumph surpassing all other developments, not only in Canada but internationally (though they were still exhibiting at the CAS and even occasionally at the Spring Exhibition of the Art Association of Montreal).⁵²

Madeleine Gariépy's piece on Riopelle, next, shows why Paris was still so important to the Borduas circle. Gariépy had paired this piece with another brief one on Jean-Paul Mousseau, who like Riopelle had just returned from Paris (Mousseau had stopped in on a trip to Prague;* Riopelle, on the other hand, had begun to settle in Paris). In this piece as in the ones above from Quartier Latin, there is an emphasis on constant movement forward, on never accepting the static.

And on to Borduas. First, an article by the bilingual artist-journalist Josephine Hambleton, with whom Borduas had been exchanging letters since late 1946, when she saw one of his works in an exhibition and sought him out.⁵³ In this article, Hambleton made the first-ever reference in print to Refus global. Although Borduas objected to some things she said, as you see in the following letter written two months later, he did not object to the links she made between art and the global crisis, links that are so evident in his own writing. He does take particular care in his letter to stress he is a materialist not a mystic, and to correct her impression that the young Automatistes were mere imitators.

* The twenty-year-old Mousseau was one of a half-dozen Montreal artists chosen to exhibit work at the first World Festival of Youth and Students in Prague, 17 July to 17 August.



And finally, an excerpt from Refus global, the last and fullest collective statement of the Automatiste group. It has been published many times, in English as well as French, but I include the last part of the lead essay here because it sums up so well the mission the group defined for itself, unallied to any politics but fundamentally political.

Thérèse Renaud, "Poem," 1945*

Renaud's book of poetry Les sables du rêve (The Sands of Dream), published the following year, contained both this poem and the Mousseau drawing appearing next to it in Quartier Latin.

I laid my head in an oyster shell. The grasses bowed their ankles and I went to meet the three travelers.

* Thérèse Renaud, "Poème," *Quartier Latin*, 13 November 1945. This translation by Ray Ellenwood is taken, with his kind permission, from his book *Egégore: A History of the Montreal Automatist Movement*, 39.

Fig. 7.7 Left
"Poem" by Thérèse Renaud and drawing by Jean-Paul Mousseau, as reproduced in *Quartier Latin*, 13 November 1945. Estate of Jean-Paul Mousseau/SODRAC 2016

Fig. 7.8 Right
Maurice Perron, *Portrait de Thérèse Renaud*, 1953. Musée National des Beaux-Arts du Québec. Reproduced with the kind permission of Line-Sylvie Perron.

One wore a glove on his hand. The glove represented the wind's lament. They told me: "Come with us. The road is long and hard but at the end there is a clearing with flowers laughing in the sun and a stream gleaming in the night."

On the way I broke my thumb but a bear came to lick it for me so I picked up some pebbles and cast them behind me.

On the second night I brushed against the fire that stars leave behind in their hurried flight and I felt the burning caress of the moon.

Having come to the clearing I took my sick feet and threw them in the stream.

I lowered my whole body into the clefts and closed the oyster shell.

Rémi-Paul Forgues, "Surrealism in Montreal," 1945*

According to a later statement by Claude Gauvreau, Forgues's engagement with surrealism began by chance when he happened to pick up Robert Élie's book Borduas in a bookstore and "the illustrations were enough to set him on fire." Forgues began to write automatic poetry in 1946, but did not stay with the automatistes for long.⁵⁵

It is gratifying to think of the many among us who have broken with the masters or idols responsible for the obliteration of our psyche. We are no longer here to endorse regional helotism, but to draw attention to vibrant new ideas.

Let it be known that we are ready to live fully our humanity in body and soul, and to accept nothing detrimental to this unity. We want to experience our search for happiness in its most evolved and intense form. In response to this pressing need for liberation we require that man have complete access to the wondrous.

As of today, united in the desire for human emancipation, we adhere to surrealism and will be those "horrible workers" to which Rimbaud refers.[†]

Our wishes: that all research into the world of dreams be recognized from now on. I think of the certainty that comes from the very core of our cosmos. I think of the moving preface of Doctor Pierre Mabilie on the role of the unconscious.[‡] Intelligence fed by the senses or by memory, and culminating

* Rémi-Paul Forgues, "Le surréalisme à Montréal," *Quartier Latin*, 13 November 1945. Translation © Lola Lemire Tostevin.

† In a well-known letter of 15 May 1871, Arthur Rimbaud speaks of the poet confronting every form of "love, of suffering, of madness" within himself in order to arrive, half-crazed, at the unknown. Other "workers" will take up those horrors at the point where he has fallen.

‡ Pierre Mabilie, "Préface à l'Éloge des Préjugés populaire," *Minotaure* 6 (winter 1935): 1-3.

in judgment and abstraction, shares with other forces the direction towards a primordial knowledge.

I think of visceral depths, of vessels of circulation, of unconscious, intuitive organs from which unvoiced angst escapes; of fresh sunlight, desire, need; of disquiet or euphoria. The internal movements of a visceral unconscious, the factors of our dynamism, “impose on concepts their directions and their colors. The visceral and the hormonal equilibrium determine our tastes and our activities, they direct our efforts, and form the core of our passion.”* I think of the depths of subconscious forgetting made up of incessant struggle, chants, screams, knowledge acquired over the course of time or over the course of a life. Man is the vessel who holds the answer to his measured labour in valleys, in deserts, in ice fields surrounded by the silent, green eye, the yellow and red of flowers of copper and water.

We insist that automatism is the dispenser of this marvelous life, of worlds where reality no longer needs to be proven. This is how André Breton defines surrealism: “Pure psychic automatism whose intention is to express verbally, or in writing, or by any other means, the real process of thought. Thought’s transcription without any control exercised by reason, and without aesthetic or moral preoccupation.”†

Encycl. Philos. Surrealism rests on belief in the superior reality of certain forms of associations neglected until now, in the power of the dream, and in the impartial play of thought. It tends definitely to discredit all other psychic mechanisms and replace them in the resolution of life’s principal problems.”

After having been separated for two hundred years from the rest of the universe, Borduas’s unconscious arrival to surrealism has been a trial by fire for us. On this point, the gouache series in 1942 was decisive. I have already professed my complete faith in Borduas; a lively year of reflection gives me the power to renew it. Around Paul-Émile Borduas an enthusiastic youth has arisen; we accept the ultimate struggle right up to the crucial horizon.

Bruno Cormier, “For Modern Thought,” 1945‡

Bruno Cormier was a medical student at the Université de Montréal when Quartier Latin published this piece, and he was close to both Claude and Pierre Gauvreau as well as to Fernand Leduc. He went on to become an international pioneer in forensic psychiatry.

* Ibid., 1.

† This and the following quote are from Breton’s *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924).

‡ Bruno Cormier, “Pour une pensée moderne,” *Quartier Latin*, 11 December 1945. Translation © Lola Lemire Tostevin.

Fig. 7.9

Maurice Perron, *Portrait de Bruno M. Cormier*, 1948.
Musée National des Beaux-Arts du Québec. Reproduced with the kind permission of Line-Sylvie Perron.



I always like to see the clowns on the high wire. Their eyes move to the left and then quickly to the right, an instinctive gesture that gives them, if only for an instant, the balance that had escaped them. Before the end of the show they will have repeated at least a hundred times this gratuitous gesture that will save them. These divine clowns, magicians who establish a new equilibrium by creating at exactly the right moment the gesture that rescues them, they are the symbol of a man seeking thought that is alive.

The situation of a man who lives by contemporary thought is not much different from the clown. He looks at the universe and adjusts his position. Let's look for a moment at this intellectual clown.

Thought originates in man through the contemplation of the world. He looks at the universe, or if you like, he questions it. Through this inquiry, he situates himself in relation to material objects and to spiritual forces. It is from this total vision that he draws a conclusion, a conclusion made up of his thought, his philosophy. A temporary philosophy, since other objects will appear in his visual field that will require this skilful clown to renew his equilibrium.

This search for living thought is never-ending. Each day (just as it was yesterday) new methods allow us to revise the meaning of life; as new scales of values come into being, new thought becomes their proper means of expression.

There are periods of history when spiritual and material problems are perceived the same way by all men. Thought, which is indivisible, brings men together and directs them to an ideal. During these times there is no opposition among philosopher, artist, scientist and the man in the street; only the forms that express thought differ.

If we analyze those periods when there is opposition between men, we will see that living thought is held by a restricted group of people. Everything outside this circle is mistaken, prejudiced. How different from those periods when everyone participates in living thought, when problems present themselves to everyone in the same spirit. When fundamental beliefs are universal, art is popular (accepted by all), and science is at the service of all. Thus the unity of philosophy, art and science is realized. (For example, I think of the Greece of Aeschylus and Phidias, I think of the Middle Ages, the troubadours, the alchemists.)

We must, once more, reach towards the realization of this unity. All areas of human activity that haven't been paralyzed by academicism provide an unequivocal witness to the necessity of change.

I invoke living art as our witness. The work of art is a sign of thought in motion. What normally sensitive person would not be intrigued by this fact: living poetry is a negation of our civilization. Bourgeois thought no longer inspires art, it is a sign of death. Just thinking of it conjures an image of sterile trees that summer could not provide with leaves.

I could reiterate this proof of the end of civilization by reflecting on modern science, which, in its bourgeois applications enslaves man; in reflecting on political and social ideas that, in spite of bourgeois protests and efforts, lead us, decidedly, towards socialism; in reflecting on philosophy ...

We have reached the day when we must renew our perception of the world. Modern thought can no longer justify bourgeois civilization; bourgeois thinking no longer inspires living art; the people are crushed; what more do we need to condemn such a civilization?

As always, and perhaps more than ever, we cannot live as if certain men had not existed. For a modern life, that is, in order to have body and spirit harmonize with one's time, it is urgent that we be aware of new values and that we act upon them. Stability is for the satisfied bourgeois; man is more like a skilful clown. Up on his cable, he now sees Hegel, Marx, Freud ... and others, (I could have written: Cézanne, Picasso, Stravinsky, Rimbaud, Lautréamont ... and others; the gesture would be the same) and their presence has changed his equilibrium. In order to maintain it, bourgeois civilization can no longer be a force; there is nothing that can be done about it, it is simply a fact.

This is why we must participate with all our being in the forces that give both

food and poetry. Someone said: “anti-modern,” but there is no doubt that it is now, more than ever, time to be pro-modern.

Fernand Leduc, “All New Consciousness ...” 1946*

All new consciousness demands to manifest itself in a form that is new; it is through life’s force itself that we partake in the coming out of a new review *lllllll*[†] whose goal is to reveal our authenticity versus chronic educational conformism.

In spite of the smug optimism of a biased propaganda that delights in over-estimating our national cultural value, we are forced to go straight to the heart of reality and recognize, without false shame, the clear fact that we have barely come out of our spiritual infancy. We only have to look back six or seven years to trace the appearance, in an actual plastic order, of the first collective awareness of an original spiritual life.

The affirmation of our thought progressively characterized itself: we took part, in different areas, in manifestations of individual and collective life but we also witnessed failures, splits were produced, groups formed, and like all lessons, we had to undergo the incoherent wave of traditional verbalism that always sows general confusion.

Now that we have replaced our first faltering steps of consciousness with a more assured pace, we owe it to ourselves to dissipate the fog of legends that surrounds us and state as precisely as possible our philosophic, artistic and political positions.

We will draw up the balance sheet of our momentum and try to define its orientation in the hope of an immediate and engaging activity. We rely on the profound rhythm of universal life, to require in all human activity the traces of life that we recognize in works of art.

The only eminently significant fact imposing itself on the country right now is of a plastic order, so it is natural that the emphasis of the review is on this domain, although it is our duty to exceed many boundaries in order to reach the whole field of national activities.

In all of life’s manifestations we always find ourselves at the crossroads of *revolt* and *excess*.

We have faith in youth because it is essentially nonconformist, exuberant and an enemy of the status quo. Like youth, we recover our equilibrium in excess. We appeal to all generous forces to oppose order with passion, servitude with pride, shrewdness with unselfishness, and to restore to everyone an audacious spontaneity to conquer the unknown.

* Fernand Leduc, “Toute conscience nouvelle ...” (1946), in André Beaudet, *Fernand Leduc: Vers les îles de lumière*, 33. Translation © Lola Lemire Tostevin.

† André Beaudet explains that Leduc calls the proposed review *lllllll* in reference to the title of the New York surrealist periodical *VVV* (*Fernand Leduc: Vers les îles de lumière*, 23 n42).

Our collective attitude can define itself by the predominance that we bestow in all things to:

desire over possession,
 dream over apparent reality,
 movement over stability,
 adventure over the cloister,
 freedom over oppression,
 revolution over our present state!

**Claude Gauvreau, from “Revolution at the Contemporary Arts Society,”
 1946***

Gauvreau at age twenty-one was just beginning to write seriously as a poet and playwright, and the first publication of his literary work came two years later in Refus global.⁵⁶ Toward the end of his life he published a personal account that has become indispensable to Automatiste history: “L’épopée automatiste vue par un cyclope” (“The Automatist Era as Seen by a Cyclops”).

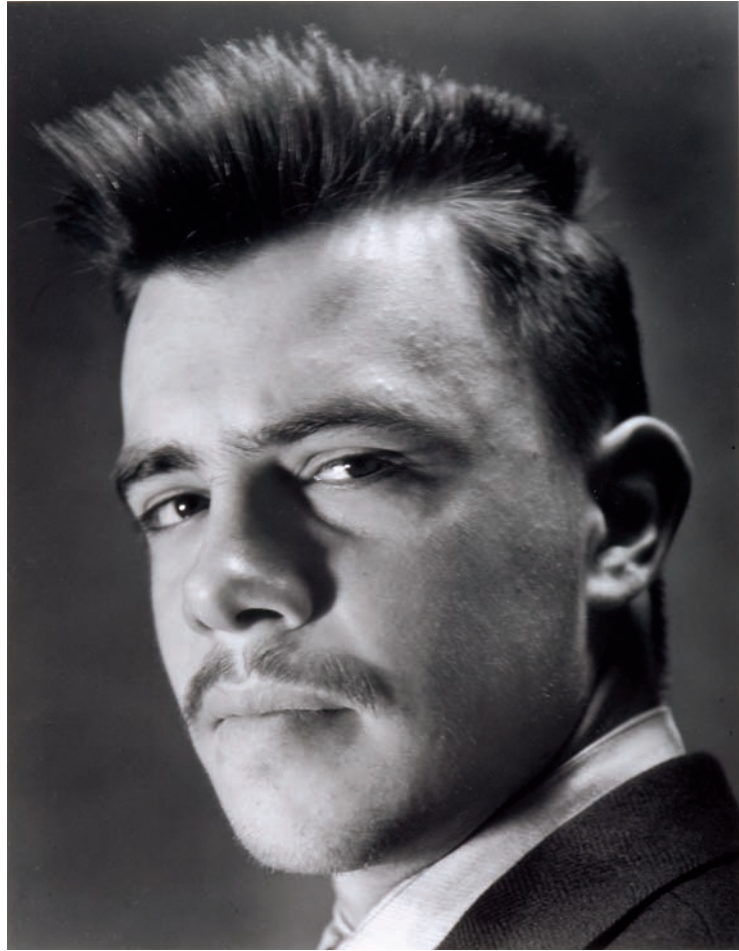
At last! Canadian painting exists. We have few poets, even fewer composers, but we have artists. The Contemporary Arts Society at the Dominion Gallery this week deserves its name. The time has come for the Society to limit the use of its defiant designation by a group of timid painters who gave themselves the impression of criticizing civilization. A universal Canadian art, like any other art, has found, through its discipline and its configuration, a home at the Society. It is an aggressive and troubling art. This new painting, by the very quantity and quality of its outstanding contribution, legitimizes the name of the Society. This exhibition is contemporary through and through ...

At the Autumn Salon in Paris in 1905, the immortal Fauves, grouped together like dangerous and culpable beasts, were caged in a small room at the back of the exhibition. It was hoped that this official show of contempt would insure they stay in oblivion permanently. However, from this crammed and badly ventilated wagon of prisoners of war or of children on public assistance, came the explosive howl that irreparably shook the building walls and reduced the rest to ashes. It was the cry of progressive thinking, the cry of revolution, the cry of life. Today the Fauves have lost their bite, they are docile and social, and their disciples, tamed beasts, apply codified formulas, distorted vestiges of what the Masters conquered in their mysterious jungle. Today, the revolution is taking place elsewhere. Those who want the new new, the entirely new, or the new that is exactly

* Claude Gauvreau, from “Révolution à la Société d’art contemporain,” *Quartier Latin*, 3 December 1946. Translation © Lola Lemire Tostevin.

Fig. 7.10

Maurice Perron, *Portrait de Claude Gauvreau*, ca. 1947. Musée National des Beaux-Arts du Québec, Reproduced with the kind permission of Line-Sylvie Perron.



the same as the old new, won't be happy with this new revolution. While it is a revolution, it is not a fauve revolution. Nor is it a cubist revolution or a surrealist revolution. It is simply a revolution. Canadian artists examined the situation from their own vantage point, their historical and psychological background, from their own setting, and from the visceral and the vital. But where there is revolution there is also poor memory.

No matter! No matter that Barbeau's extraordinary and gigantic canvas, alongside a classic Riopelle and another large Barbeau, are crammed into the smallest possible room and cannot be seen in their proper perspective due to the lack of proper distance. No matter that Leduc is at the top end of the four cardinal points and Mousseau practically sweeps the floor! Their confirmation howls with hallucinating persistence. Little wonder the incongruous neo-academics band together like frightened rats in a fire! The self-possessed block, a marble block, if you will, of Barbeau, Fauteux, Riopelle, Gauvreau, Borduas, Leduc, Mousseau, confirms the presence of Canadian art in history.

It is an unprecedented, unbelievable and extraordinary fact! The life of painting has immigrated to Montreal and, as of now, the New Yorkers don't know where to turn nor could they care less. The Parisians, after the most phenomenal emergence in the history of painting, are a little worse for wear, the traditional and rational formation of Europeans making them hesitant in taking the necessary step toward the present pictorial evolution. Smothered by neo-surrealists, neo-cubists, and impotent neo-fauves, they timidly and awkwardly dilute their glorious and inherited past. The Canadian revolutionaries, on the other hand, not the followers or the conformist importers, have taken the audacious step toward the next evolutionary stage, the only possible step after the admirable geometrical expressionism of the cubists and the revealing automatism of thought of the surrealists. The living Canadian artists, because of their intellectual courage – after all this evolution could, sooner or later, be fatal – have implemented a strict automatism in their work.

There is much to be said about the implementation of automatism. Much will be written about it. For now the fact is enormous. Canadians have done this. *Canadians*. Them alone. And how do the philistines act before this overwhelming truth? What do our proud nationalist flag-carrying pretenders do? Where is our “elite” in this joyful banquet and moving celebration? Ah! The cowards! How repugnant! The reality of this unforeseen phenomenon, which should cause them to tear their hair out, draws but the limp complacency of a capricious and moping convent girl, if not insults, from the dishonoured. On the other hand, I would like to draw attention to the wonderful understanding from a man who is intellectually alert and sensitive to the arts: John Lyman. Lyman has understood the young, has protected them, and has espoused the pictorial revolution with all his heart. Thank you Lyman! Thank you, young Lyman!

The young artists' movement, set in motion by the masterful clarity of Paul-Émile Borduas, has turned acquired and unnatural visual habits upside down. Most people scoff at rigorously planned and constructed composition with harmonious dimensions that fall into place, or that a drawing's trace is perceptive. They want to see only those aspects of objects they recognize and do not want the emotional rhythm of their habits disturbed. Rembrandt's art, when it was born, did not please and triggered indignant yelps of a sow. It was revolutionary then but now that we are used to it we want to see things that resemble a Rembrandt. Matisse didn't smell very good the day of his artistic birth, but now that the works of Matisse have become habit, we want to see canvases displaying the same characteristics as Matisse's. The same with Picasso. For it to be alive, an artistic phenomenon – which I will examine less superficially elsewhere – must insist, in a conscious adult, on its essential qualities: a malleable sensibility and a continually evolving unity of form and volume. The control governing it must emphasize acutely the current reality of the unknown, so that visual habits are constantly challenged by an art worthy of the name.

Madeleine Gariépy, "Riopelle," 1947*

Gariépy was the art critic for the Montreal weekly magazine Notre Temps.

Riopelle has returned from a year of study in Paris. He was most impressed by the intellectual awareness and rigour of thought of the French. Their preoccupation with theory is pushed to the limit: each surrealist painting, each automatic poem can be defended by its creator from an objective point of view and with astonishing precision and logic.

"Everyone reads, everyone discusses, even the superintendent of your building has something to teach you on the intellectual and political fronts. It can be unsettling for a nation, but this intense critical sense can also be its best defense in a time of crisis."

"But, materially, the situation is very bad."

"Yes, they are weakened, destabilized, and their intellectual energy is the only powerful weapon against the snare of the communist party who offers them bread.[†]"

"How do they view this situation?"

"With uneasiness, but you see, in order to win France, thousands of intellectuals have to be won over who, I repeat, possess the most extraordinary rigour of thought. So, you can imagine the reaction when Radio Moscow denounces artists like Matisse and Picasso and orders them removed from museums. Caught off guard, the French Communist Party quickly explained it only meant that great artists should be removed from the presence of pasticheurs and, in any case, this had already been done in the best interest of the artists. But everyone understood what had happened."

"One must save the bad painters from themselves!"

All of Riopelle's paintings have the energetic qualities of calculated skill. The quickly sketched forms emerge cleanly and have an upbeat appeal while the colours attest to a brio and a spontaneity capable of expressing themselves spontaneously.

His canvases are voluntarily impulsive. Voluntarily in that Riopelle's expressiveness goes beyond his technical skill which, he himself admits, was the greatest danger to his development. He even abandoned painting for a while, having acquired an almost complete facility in reproduction and not being able to visualize where this could lead.

For him, making a painting for the sake of making a painting is going down the wrong path. This is how surrealist or impressionist academicism came about; it is necessary to reach towards new possibilities and undertake new explorations.

* Madeleine Gariépy, "Retours d'Europe, Mousseau et Riopelle," *Notre Temps*, 6 December 1947, 5.

† Ray Ellenwood notes that apparently Gariépy misquoted Riopelle here, causing him some embarrassment (*Egregore*, 105–6). This led Riopelle to publish an open letter clarifying his position, expressing his disapproval of the communists while honouring Marx and Lenin as well as Freud, Breton, and Mabille ("Lettre ouverte de Jean-Paul Riopelle," *Le combat*, 20 December 1947).



Fig. 7.11

Maurice Perron, *Jean-Paul Riopelle et Pierre Gauvreau*, 1948. Musée National des Beaux-Arts du Québec, Reproduced with the kind permission of Line-Sylvie Perron.

An artist must feel totally engaged in his work so that when one vein has been depleted and the impetus that made his painting surge has dried up, he must then look elsewhere.

Riopelle's overriding concern in his approach to painting has been a constant exploration and the conviction that man is aware of a world invisible to human eyes which needs to be expressed.

Josephine Hambleton, from "A Canadian Painter of Vision," 1948*

Three British officers whom the Germans held in solitary confinement during the war, described their experiences in a recent British broadcast. One had been chained to his cell wall for several years. Eating little and unoccupied, he had initially concentrated upon his misery. One day, however, he forgot his suffering and his mind became peaceful and relaxed. Thereafter, his spiritual and not his physical life absorbed all his thoughts. It is towards an expression of that withdrawal from the material that Paul Emile Borduas, the French-Canadian painter, constantly gropes.

Mr Borduas shares the leadership of the iconoclastic artists' revolt against the conservative traditions, in Canadian art, with Mr Pellán. Both men helped found

* Josephine Hambleton, from "A Canadian Painter of Vision," *Evening Citizen* (Ottawa), 12 June 1948.

the Contemporary Arts Society in Montreal nine years ago,[†] in order to popularize “modern” paintings and sculptures. During the past few months, two groups have formed, one, “Prisme d’Yeux” pivoting about Mr Pellán, and the other, “Automatisme” pivoting about Mr Borduas. Both groups hold exhibitions from time to time and have received favorable press notices.

Mr Pellán is a brilliant intellectual, favoring violent colors and dynamic designs. Mr Borduas is, on the contrary, mystical. For those who enjoy non-objective painting his “Arbres dans la Nuit” means one of those exquisite pauses in time when perfect beauty transfigures the imagination and plays, upon every chord of being, harmonies ineffable. No more than the notes of Schubert’s Serenade imitate sounds heard during an average day, do the forms and tones of “Les Arbres dans la Nuit” suggest any trees visible upon this planet [...]

“We do not yet understand the spiritual significance of painting,” he remarked one morning while we were strolling through Montreal. Shopkeepers were sweeping the sidewalks, washing windows, laying fruits and vegetables on their stalls. Slanting, silvery sunlight filled the streets.

“Artists have perfected the copying of the surface appearance of the physical world beyond improvement,” he said. “The world of dreams they have left virtually untouched. Perhaps you know the advice that Leonardo da Vinci gave his pupils? He said ‘a sponge impregnated with various colors and thrown against a wall leaves spots which may appear like landscapes, and a variety of images may be seen in such spots, heads of men, various animals, battles, rocky scenes, clouds, woods and the like.’”

It is not the hallucinations caused by staring fixedly at spots upon a wall, molten metal upon sand, which inspire Mr Borduas however, but the visions which cross the eyes when the lids are closed. “Those strange forms float up from the subconscious mind and I believe presage some emotion which eventually stirs the conscious mind to action. I try to paint those visions as they occur to me.”

“Every artist draws his compositions in a different manner. Why? I believe the manner of his drawing provides a clue to his personality but we cannot read his personality from his manner of drawing. That is partly because he paints what he thinks people will buy instead of leaving his imagination free rein, but only partly. Painting is still in its infancy. That is the real reason.

“The cavemen grunted when they wanted something. Gradually they learned to talk. Then they learned to make signs to correspond to word-sounds. Then they developed reading and writing. Eventually language became the tongue of the imagination and with it Dante expressed the aspiring of the soul towards perfect goodness.”

Painting was, compared to the science of reading and writing, at the stage of the Egyptian hieroglyphs, Mr Borduas explained. That is to say, artists copied

* Actually, Pellán wasn’t involved in the formation of the CAS; he was still in Paris.

scenes which pleased people, or illustrated lives of saints and popular heroes, represented heroic acts and the like. To become the mirror of the soul, the imagination must be allowed to use color and form in as abstract a manner as a composer does notes of music.

In an unpublished manifesto, Mr Borduas states that Christianity has not realized the universal brotherhood of man. There is one among his paintings called “Nonne et Pretre Babylonien.” It groups to one side a vague blue and white and grey figure, suggesting a priestess, black cowl over her head, to the other side, reddish brown and brassy forms suggesting an Assyrian priest beating a drum and between the two a strange and desolate grey shape. Is this shape intended to represent the Spirit of Man forlorn because rival bigotries travesty religious faith? Mr. Borduas does not state, and the painting is so vague in outline he might easily claim the supposition purely imaginary. From the theme of religion, Mr Borduas’ essay passes to that of science, saying it has been used less to relieve human misery than to perfect lethal weapons. A French Dominican priest, Father Couturier, and a distinguished Canadian art critic, Maurice Gagnon, acclaim Mr Borduas as an excellent and inventive artist. To me the dogmatic faith of his followers, as of the followers of Mr Pellan seems to encourage servile imitation of the master rather than an original contribution to art. A few artists think that the apparent chaos in Mr Borduas’ work reflects the despair of a man of conscience, to whom the high aspirations of the saints and mystics, the artists and poets seem to have all ended in utter futility, and to whom humanity seems bound to a wheel of endless suffering, rising from out of the slough of one war but to fall into the worse carnage of another.

Paul-Émile Borduas, letter to Josephine Hambleton, 1948*

Borduas’s letter, like his comments as recorded in Hambleton’s article, reveals much about his state of mind in that summer leading up to Refus global.

Gilles Lapointe in his tremendously thoughtful study of Borduas’s letters remarks on their great importance to Borduas: for one thing, they often functioned as a “secret atelier” in which Borduas sorted out many things in relation to his work and to “aesthetic and political considerations concerning the position of the artist and the crucial stages of development ... of nonfigurative art in Quebec.”⁵⁷ Lapointe observes that because it is an open form, letter writing lent itself especially well to an artist drawn to discoveries born of chance and the unexpected, to “objective mysteries.”⁵⁷

* Paul-Émile Borduas, letter to Josephine Hambleton, [mid-August] 1948; in Bourassa and Lapointe, *Paul-Émile Borduas: Écrits II*, 246–50. Handwritten original in the Musée d’art Contemporain de Montréal, T. 130. Translation © Lola Lemire Tostevin.

Dear friend,

Weariness, anguish, and the uselessness of certain explanations made me postpone until now responding to your last two letters. I had no problem with the account of your trip to Toronto, contrary to your first letter justifying your article.

It is as a matter of duty and loyalty that I address our profound differences.

"I hope I didn't offend you. I couldn't translate your painting into a non-figurative style as Robert Élie did, first because I've never tried to and second, because my editor would not have accepted it."

Whether the style is figurative or not is unimportant to me, dear friend. What is important is the degree and quality of the connection with reality. Style is a question of evolution, not of nature. The basic nature of humanity is more important to me than the grand development of its ideas.

"Do you have the correspondence between Jean Cocteau and Jacques Maritain? According to Cocteau, 'art for art's sake or for the people isn't worth anything. Art must devote itself to God ... Beauty would then become righteousness; masterpieces would become acts of love, and genius, sainthood.' Maritain replies that 'the artist who devotes himself to the liberation of his being through art is doomed to failure since he wanders without God.'"

No. I do not have this correspondence. Between these two *idealists*. That art should be for art's sake, for the people, or for God – one makes no more sense than another.

Art is as imperative to the mind as hunger is imperative to the stomach.

What is the mind? What is the stomach? I don't know. What I do know is that these two muscles are parts of a whole, and I hope that one day the role of each will be better understood in relation to the whole.

I agree that art's qualities should be moral. However, these can be justified only by poetic qualities, and poetic qualities are linked harmoniously to the material that expresses them. The material universe, the only one man has, contains all this in superabundance.

"Perhaps the comparison with Reinblatt offended you. I tried to say what Jean Cocteau expressed so much better, because the impression I have of Mr Borduas' paintings leads me to believe that I can see the realization of the thesis he maintains during the course of this correspondence."*

* Hambleton's article compared Borduas with Pellán but not with Moe Reinblatt.

It is unpleasant to hear myself described as a mystic. I wouldn't say that a tree is a mystic because it is immersed in the universe. Nor would I say it of a man who has a pressing need to live his potential to the fullest.

Isn't a mystic one who imagines life to be an unattainable dream? A dream external to mankind and its power? I have no doubt that this has given man, in certain times and at certain moments, invaluable joy; I am, however, far from such a state. My greatest desire is to establish the most elementary, the most immediate, the most humble and, above all, the most "primitive" contact with all things.

"I regret if the comment regarding the Automatists saddened you, but I do not retract it. Bronzino was not a Michelangelo for having imitated Michelangelo. There is always a talented group of people who gather around creative genius because they cannot stand alone ..."

This is too simple, dear friend. I can't make out, even from a distance, the tiniest speck of truth.

Ever since the impressionists, one course has been opened for artistic exploration: personality.

For those young artists, whom I trust, I was but an opportunity to glimpse and set in motion their research.

At the stage where we are, the pursuit of this knowledge can only be done within a collective, even if it is only a small group. Until something better comes along. The defections have been numerous and they continue. Contrary to what you believe, the strongest personalities were never the first to leave, but the weakest. I can tell you now that the foreseeable future is obvious.

You have seen pearl divers at work, but only from the shore. Because the dives are at the heart of the treasure, you mistook the site of the dives for the pearls brought to light. The future will reveal the perfect individuality of these divers of a shared sincerity: the definition of every influential personality throughout the ages.

"I am, myself, too proud to hitch my wagon to that of a master's, no matter how great he is."

Be fearful of too much pride, dear Josephine. The triumphs of intelligence are relative to the risks taken. The more ardent the fire, the more urgent the need not to escape but to assimilate it, to make it yours forever.

One can only exceed one's limits with ardent conviction.

"Perhaps in this am I proving my English origins."

The need to prevail is common to all, you wouldn't know how to escape it.

“The English in northern England where my father was born, believe in the complete independence of the individual, to the point of making it a religion.”

So do we. But independence is more or less great depending on its greater or lesser connection to reality. I am sending you *Refus Global*.

Paul-Émile Borduas, from *Refus global*, 1948*

We must break with the conventions of society once and for all, and reject its utilitarian spirit. We must refuse to function knowingly at less than our physical and mental potential; refuse to close our eyes to vice and fraud perpetrated in the name of knowledge or favours or due respect. We refuse to be confined to the barracks of plastic arts – it’s a fortress, but easy enough to avoid. We refuse to keep silent. Do what you want with us, but you must hear us out. We will not accept your fame or attendant honors. They are the stigmata of shame, silliness and servility. We refuse to serve, or to be used for such purposes. We reject all forms of INTENTION, the two-edged, perilous sword of REASON. Down with both of them, back they go!

MAKE WAY FOR MAGIC! MAKE WAY FOR OBJECTIVE MYSTERIES!

MAKE WAY FOR LOVE!

MAKE WAY FOR INTERNAL DRIVES!

Set against and balancing this total refusal is our complete responsibility.

The self-serving act remains attached to its author – it is stillborn.

Acts of passion break free because they are inherently dynamic.

Gladly we accept full responsibility for tomorrow. Let rational effort turn backwards and concern itself with disengaging the present from the limbo of the past.

Our passions are shaping the future spontaneously, unpredictably, compulsively.

* Paul-Émile Borduas, from the lead essay in *Refus global* (Montreal: Mithra-Mythe, 1948). The translation for this excerpt is borrowed with the kind permission of Ray Ellenwood from his *Total Refusal: The Complete 1948 Manifesto of the Montreal Automatists*, 37–41.



Fig. 7.12

Paul Borduas. Photograph by Ronny Jaques, 1946. e010957743, Library and Archives Canada / Ronny Jaques.

Jean-Paul Mousseau said of Borduas that he was a very restless man, “very demanding of himself and of others, a man who called everything into question. He could get very angry if he detected falsity anywhere. He wasn’t an angel, but a man who responded to his anguish and his own high demands” (“Mousseau, Picher et Corbeil parle de BORDUAS,” *La Presse*, Montreal, 20 January 1962). Marian Scott, on learning of Borduas’s death in 1960, wrote, “I remember an evening at your place where we talked of painting; toward midnight, a student phoned you to tell you enthusiastically that he had just finished a painting. You invited him to come and show it to you, and he did. And once more I felt the warmth of the connection between teacher and student that characterized you when you were teaching at the École du meuble” (Scott, “Prêt à tout risquer ...” *Le Devoir*, Montreal, 27 February 1960).

This photograph appeared in Mavis Gallant’s article “Above the Crowd in French Canada,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, July 1946, 58–9.

We are forced to accept the past along with our birth; but there is nothing sacred about it. We don't owe the past a thing.

It is naïve and unhealthy to look at people and events in history through a magnifying glass of fame, exaggerating their virtues to the point where they seem unattainable by modern man. Of course they show qualities beyond the reach of slick, academic counterfeits, but the same may be said whenever a man follows the most basic drives of his nature; whenever he consents to be a new man in a new age (which is the definition of all men for all time).

Enough brutal assassination of the present and future under repeated clubbings from the past.

We have done enough if we turn back to yesterday in order to extricate the drives of today. At best, tomorrow can never be anything more than the unforeseeable consequence of today.

No use worrying until it comes.

A Final Squaring of Accounts

The Establishment resents our dedication to a cause, our anxious outbursts, our excesses. They see them as an insult to their indolence, their smugness, their fine sense of the good things in life (real life, full of generous hope and love, having been smothered under habit).

Friends of the status quo suspect us of preaching 'Revolution.' Friends of the 'Revolution' call us mere rebels, saying we 'protest against the established order, but our desire is only to transform, not change it.'

Very delicately put, but we think we understand.

It's a matter of class.

We are credited with the naïve intention of wanting to 'transform' society by replacing the men in power with others just like them. So obviously, why change at all?

But they're not the right class! As if a change of class meant a change of civilization, change of desires, change of hope.

They dedicate themselves (on a fixed salary, plus a cost-of-living allowance) to organizing the proletariat; and more power to them. The trouble is, once

victoriously ensconced, they'll want more than their present meagre wages. Always on the backs of the same proletariat and always in the time-honored way, they will demand supplementary adjustments and long-term renewals with no questions asked.

We agree, nonetheless, that they are part of a long historical tradition. Salvation will only come after exploitation to great success.

They will be that excess.

They will be so in the normal course of things, with no need of anyone in particular. And the feast will be sumptuous. We have refused, in advance, to take part.

Therein lies our 'guilty abstention.'

You can keep your spoils, rational and premeditated like everything else on the warm bosom of decadence. We'll settle for unpredictable passion; we'll settle for total risk through total refusal.

(We can't help the fact that various social classes have succeeded each other in governing the people, and all inevitably fell into decadence. Nor can we help it if history teaches that only a full development of our faculties, followed by a complete renewal of our emotional well-springs, can take us out of this dead end, onto the open road leading towards a civilization impatient to be born.)

Those in power, and those with aspirations, would all love to grant our every wish, if only we would measure out our activities in coffee spoons and help pave the way for their schemes of distortion.

To win the day, we have to pull our caps over our eyes, plug our ears, roll up our sleeves and wade into the pack, clearing a path left and right.

If we're going to be cynics, we'd like to do it spontaneously and without malice aforethought ...

Kind souls are apt to smile at the limited financial success of our collective exhibitions, charmed to think they're the first to notice how poorly our works sell.

It is no vain hope of getting rich that causes us to go on mounting one exhibition after another. We know there's a world of difference between us and the wealthy. They don't like playing with fire.

In the past, any sales in that direction have come about through unintentional misunderstandings.

We believe this text will help avoid any future confusion.

If our activities seem feverish, it is because we feel the urgent need for solidarity with others.

And in that regard, our success has been explosive.

Yesterday we were alone and irresolute.

Today a group exists, with deep and courageous ramifications, some of them already spreading beyond our borders.

We must share the glorious responsibility of conserving the precious treasure we are heir to. It too is part of a long historical tradition.

Our relationship to its artifacts must be constantly renewed, challenged, called into question. This is an impalpable, demanding relationship which requires the vital forces of action.

The treasure I speak of is the poetic stock, the emotional fountain of youth from which future centuries will drink. It can only be transmitted if it is TRANSFORMED. Otherwise, it is distorted.

Let those moved by the spirit of this adventure join us.

Within a foreseeable future, men will cast off their useless chains. They will realize their full, individual potential according to the unpredictable, necessary order of spontaneity – in splendid anarchy.

Until then, we will not rest or falter. Hand in hand with others thirsting for a better life, no matter how long it takes, regardless of support or persecution, we will joyfully respond to a savage need for liberation.

Cold War Culture

We were all in high hopes again that this time it truly would be a war that would change the world. Instead, we received Hiroshima.

Dorothy Livesay

Going through the piles of documents written by artists and critics in the decade following the Second World War, I got a strong sense that this was when things started to look like today, and the more I read, the more sure I was. So, I was pleased recently to see a comment by the historian Daniel Wickberg that according to the newer trends in intellectual history, the mid-twentieth century and especially the early Cold War years are “in the most profound sense, the first years of our own time.”¹

There has been a whole “cultural turn” in the study of the Cold War.² Hundreds of articles and a good many books, mainly American, have been published about Cold War culture, mostly concerning movies but also music, literature, comics, the broader popular culture, and, of course, art.³ In those pertaining to art, I see something resembling my own sense of a changed perspective. Art historian V.J. Fletcher commented that “the after effects of the war – the Cold War, McCarthyism, the threat of nuclear holocaust – made the cosmic constructs and rational conceptions of man and society seem irrelevant, unrealistic, even dangerous ... Many postwar works of art concern feelings of anxiety, despair, uncertainty, and pessimism. The utopian conception of man’s perfectibility and rational nature was replaced by a tragic view of life.”⁴ Art historian Greta Berman described the entire decade of the fifties as the decade of angst in art.⁵ This literature, like my own exploration of artists’ and critics’ writings, points to a cultural change as profound as that brought on by the Second World War. The Canadian artist-curator Andrew Hunter has suggested even more broadly that the appearance of the bomb “marked a significant shift in humanity’s relationship to nature and to God, much like the shift during the Renaissance, when ‘man’ was repositioned, philosophically and scientifically.”⁶

My sense is that the turning point was in 1948–49, when it really began to sink into people’s consciousness that peace had not returned and that on the contrary, the bomb was here to stay. You have already seen the Automatistes speak of this, and *Refus global* is a document of that moment. In fact, as the Cold War took shape, the talk of escalation and of a possible nuclear war was inescapable. Canada’s minister of foreign affairs Lester B. Pearson spoke publicly in 1948 about the high level of threat,⁷ and former senator T. Damien Bouchard wrote that

Fig. 8.1

Ghitta Caiserman, *War Dream*, 1947.
Etching on wove paper, 20.3 × 15.7 cm;
plate: 12.5 × 10 cm. Purchased 1992.
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa,
accession number 36680. Photo: NGC.

Ghitta Caiserman (later Caiserman-Roth) had studied as a child with the Montreal artist Alexandre Bercovitch (chapter 4), and then in New York with Moses and Raphael Soyer. Her work of the forties had strong social themes. In the fifties she was to become a well-known painter in Montreal.



“statesmen today are asking themselves this question: is a third world war to take place to settle the future relations between the ‘democratic nations’ and those under the influence of the Soviets?”⁸ A French Canadian reporter commented that the atomic bomb was the leitmotif of all the newscasts and that while one must not become obsessed by the cold war psychosis, “we already live in a veritable atomic atmosphere.”⁹ In English Canada, a University of Toronto philosopher writing of world tension said that “a psychological analysis of the forces making for the destruction of humanity provides little justification for optimism.”¹⁰ The journalist-critic Arthur Phelps said that “what we think and what we do and whether we live or die are all interwoven in a scheme of swift and terrible interaction; we are now in a composite atomic world.”¹¹

With all this came a dull horror, an atmosphere of “ambient fear,” to use Canadian social theorist Brian Massumi’s term. In particular, Massumi spoke of the likelihood that “the social landscape of fear had been fundamentally reconfigured by the cultural break that many commentators identify as having occurred after World War II.”¹²



Fig. 8.2

Anne Kahane, *Maquette for the Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner*, 1953. Maquette, copper tubing and plastic wood bound together with wire, on wooden base. 52 × 22.2 × 20 cm. Musée National des Beaux-Arts du Québec, 1992.137, gift of Ethel Achtman.

Henri Girard commented in 1949 one must admire young Canadians with the courage and audacity to take up sculpture since there was no creative ambiance for it, no teachers like Cosgrove and Borduas and Pellan for painting (Girard, "Naissance de la sculpture," 21). But in the fifties, two young sculptors grew prominent nationally: Anne Kahane and Louis Archambault. Kahane had her first solo show at the Galerie Agnès Lefort in 1953, the year she made this prize-winning maquette for a competition organized by the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, England. Robert Ayre wrote: "You recognize the weary head, you feel the tension of the hands downthrust toward the earth ... the prison bars, which are also the binding chains, are one with the ribs and they extend into the sharp spikes which are the symbols of torture; the work is a powerful synthesis and moving realization of the theme" (Ayre, "Anne Kahane – An Art of These Times," 145).

I do not think one can define the exact relationship between the conditions of the early Cold War era and the art produced during it, although Fletcher and Berman may have come close. I simply repeat once more the comment made by the artist Louis Muhlstock in responding to a suggestion that his humanist subject matter was part of a development: “No, it wasn’t a development; it was an atmosphere ... something I had *known* and experienced and seen.”¹³ *Development* suggests merely an art world happening; *atmosphere* gives unconditional validity to all the ways an artist might respond to local and global actualities. With that in mind, then, I look at the writings of the postwar decade, a decade of economic growth, consumerism, and fear.



The artist Charles Comfort made a remarkable, moving statement in 1948 about this sense of a permanent loss of peace and what it meant for art.

There are some obvious characteristics about the pace of change today that permeate our lives with baleful insecurity. They far outstrip the normal flow of natural progression. Much of the current anxiety created by these accelerations is no doubt caused by the world’s increasing destructive potential ... the implications of the destructive employment of U235, and the possibilities of the willful creation of lethal plague conditions do not contribute to our sense of security in a world where actual warfare may be only held in abeyance. Some of us may remember that World War I was styled as a war to end wars. In fact, for a full decade it might reasonably have been thought to have done so. Alas, the present generation inherits a woefully changed psychology. As one considers the factors of transition in the decade 1938–48 such factors cannot be disregarded. They form the background, conscious and unconscious for painters of today. They do not hinder the determination of the younger generation of Canadians to express themselves in the visual arts. Never in our history has there been such widespread intelligent interest shown. But they do influence this expression. If we look back to the painting following World War I, we find in the then-rebellious canvases of the Group of Seven a simple clarity of statement, the romantic humanistic concept of a world filled with wonder and colourful beauty, an ordered world in which one moved with security. The canvases appearing today display a marked shift from that attitude.¹⁴

In that same state of mind, Pegi Nicol MacLeod wrote to a friend in 1947 that “the world is in a desperate state of fear right now and so things tighten and become tense – people are terrified of losing things they may not be losing at all or maybe never had so they begin to attempt to control, to press, to lay down rules: This applies to artists unfortunately, same as anyone. They reflect the



Fig. 8.3

Fritz Brandtner's *Age of Anxiety* as reproduced in Charles Comfort's introduction to "Observations on a Decade 1938–48: Canadian Painting, Sculpture and Print Making," *Journal, Royal Architectural Institute of Canada*, 25, no. 1 (January 1948): 8. Whereabouts of painting unknown.

world.”¹⁵ A year later her husband wrote, “as for America, we look forward to high production and prosperity at home and high taxes and high armaments, and strife abroad ever widening and ever increasing and eventual war throughout the world and then a world to which no one looks forward at all.”¹⁶ Such direct statements as these are unusual in the writings of the era but it is fair to say that they represent its changed atmosphere.



It is appropriate, before going on to speak more specifically of what I found in artists' and critics' writings from the early Cold War, to name certain artists who had direct experience of the world war or the Holocaust or both.

In 1945, Alex Colville had been sent as a war artist to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp to document what he saw there – to represent the unrepresentable, the thousands of dead and dying people.¹⁷ “One felt badly,” he is often quoted as saying, “because one didn’t feel worse. That is, you see one dead person and it is bad: five hundred is not five hundred times worse. There is a certain point at which you begin to feel nothing.”¹⁸ But he had nightmares for much of the rest of his

life. After the war, living and teaching in Sackville, New Brunswick, he began to paint banal but enigmatic subjects using a measured, painstaking representational technique. His paintings reflect a sense of a world held back from chaos. We can easily understand the attraction of the French existentialists Sartre and Camus, whom he read after the war. Mark Cheetham sees in this a deep exploration of how to live in a world which had allowed the Holocaust to happen.¹⁹ Rejecting the School of Paris, as Colville explains in his 1951 statement below, he looked instead to much older periods, including ancient Egypt and the early Renaissance. There is a parallel to his highly constructed images in the meticulous realism of such American painters as George Tooker, Paul Cadmus, and Jared French, a realism that was, according to art historian Greta Berman, an important part of an iconography of Cold War angst.²⁰ In fact, Colville spoke of some of these artists as his immediate predecessors.²¹

Aba Bayefsky, an official war artist like Colville, who at age twenty-two was present at the liberation of Bergen-Belsen in 1945. "It was the determining factor in everything I have done since."²² Much of his subsequent work represents skeletal figures and other images of despair.

Maxwell Bates of Alberta, having been a German prisoner of war and having seen the concentration camp killing, began in 1948 or so to paint scarecrows as "a kind of despised object." He painted puppets and marionettes too because "people were made to do things as if they were on the end of a string," propelled by forces they couldn't control.²³

Miller Brittain of New Brunswick, having joined the Royal Canadian Air Force in 1942, trained as a bomb aimer and flew many missions over Germany. Art historian Brian Foss explained that after that experience and a stint as an official war artist he "retreated into a private world of subjective experience."²⁴ Having turned urgently to biblical themes that deal with what Foss calls "truly epic subject matter,"²⁵ Brittain speaks from that private world in his "Note by the Artist". Brittain describes these themes as paradigms of the full range of human emotions. However, as Tom Smart points out, the works in question actually favour certain *extreme* emotions: "ecstasy, elation, euphoria, frenzy, exaltation, joy, and rapture bordering on hysteria."²⁶

Jack Shadbolt, after cataloguing Army photographs taken at concentration camps, began upon his return home to paint Vancouver buildings peopled with figures from those camps, and in 1947, savage dogs appeared among ruins in his "Contemporary Images" series. To him, the postwar world was fraught with "unrest, uncertainty, chaos, disillusion, stupidity and changing allegiances."²⁷

Worst by far, Gershon Iskowitz spent the six years of the war in Nazi concentration camps, and made terrifying images of the camps and of human cruelty, secretly at the time and then openly for many years afterwards.

It seems obvious that artists who had been through these experiences would never be the same, nor would their art.



Fig. 8.4

Jack Shadbolt, *Dog among the Ruins*, n.d.
Watercolour with carbon pencil, 78.2 × 56.9 cm.
Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, accession no.
1980.069.001. Credit: Colin Graham Fund /
Canada Council Matching Funds, Paris Number:
2669. © Courtesy of Simon Fraser University Gal-
leries, Burnaby, BC. Image courtesy of Art Gallery
of Greater Victoria. Photographer: Stephen Topfer.



Charles Comfort remarked in his 1948 statement above that there was more “widespread intelligent interest” in making art than ever before in Canada, and it is certainly true that in the economic boom that followed the war and that continued for more than two decades, artistic activity was growing and spreading, not only in the pre-war centres of Montreal and Toronto but across the country. Comfort continued by saying that the era was reflected especially, although he didn’t quite say how, in an increasing interest in non-objective art. This was prescient: non-objective and highly abstract art would gain importance with amazing speed. Artists from earlier days sometimes felt left behind. Pegi Nicol MacLeod wrote glumly that Cézanne’s example was no longer important, that “no one, today, is

supposed to be concerned with digging form out of nature” but “we are supposed rather to be seeking to leave this world and its foolish forms.”²⁸ In Quebec City, Jean-Paul Lemieux ceased to paint for a time because he was “afraid of appearing reactionary,”²⁹ and the Ottawa painter Henri Masson protested in 1951 that “l’académie de Borduas” had become a veritable plague among young Montreal painters.³⁰ John Lyman, once so central in Montreal’s modern art scene, muttered that few painters of the moment had the courage to do figurative painting.³¹ Paraskeva Clark complained that “at the shows today it’s almost all non-objective, and even if they are no good they are given the awards. I am too old now to start following the young. There’s something frightening about all this newness, it gives you a loss of aim ... In the thirties and forties art had a place, I had a place and I was in all the shows – now it’s painful.”³²

Not all the pre-war painters felt dismayed. Louis Muhlstock purchased non-objective paintings by the Toronto artist Harold Town. “My eye is trained; after many years my eye is able to read the language in which these men speak.”³³ Muhlstock himself made non-objectives in 1951, in the thirty-fourth year of his career, explaining that “I wanted to let the colours on my palette speak to each other.”³⁴ To the critic Robert Ayre, Muhlstock’s new work was simply a continuation: “Movement and growth, warmth and color, the qualities of his landscapes and still lifes, these qualities themselves, in their essence, are the subject of his new painting.”³⁵ Jack Humphrey painted highly abstracted images while travelling in France on a government fellowship in 1952–53 (though once back in New Brunswick he seemed to feel, rightly or wrongly, that he was held back by a small local art world and a central Canadian prejudice against that world).³⁶ David Milne admired “the freedom that is a delightful part of all the Borduas things I have seen.”³⁷

But clearly, a line had been drawn. One of the younger representational artists, Ghitta Caiserman, commented, “With almost everybody on the other side, I think we have to be better painters to make our points. Our surfaces, for instance, have to be just as exciting, as, say, Borduas’s surfaces.”³⁸

In the early fifties, non-figurative artists got a boost from Cold War ideology as the government, with its war-expanded administrative structure, began to intervene much more in matters gathered under the catchword “culture.” In 1952, when the National Gallery first sent work to the Venice Biennale, that most prestigious of international modern shows, it chose key figures of the thirties and forties: Emily Carr, David Milne, Alfred Pellán, and Goodridge Roberts;³⁹ but in 1954, the Gallery sent paintings by Borduas and Jean-Paul Riopelle as well as the abstracts of B.C. Binning of Vancouver.* No Group of Seven artist was sent, ever. Reviewing the 1954 Biennale as a member of the international jury, the Canadian art historian R.H. Hubbard observed that “in contrast with the otherwise universal adoption of

* Twelve of these works from Venice 1954 were shown by invitation as “Canadian Abstract Expressionist Paintings” at the Phillips Gallery in Washington, DC, 16–31 January 1955.

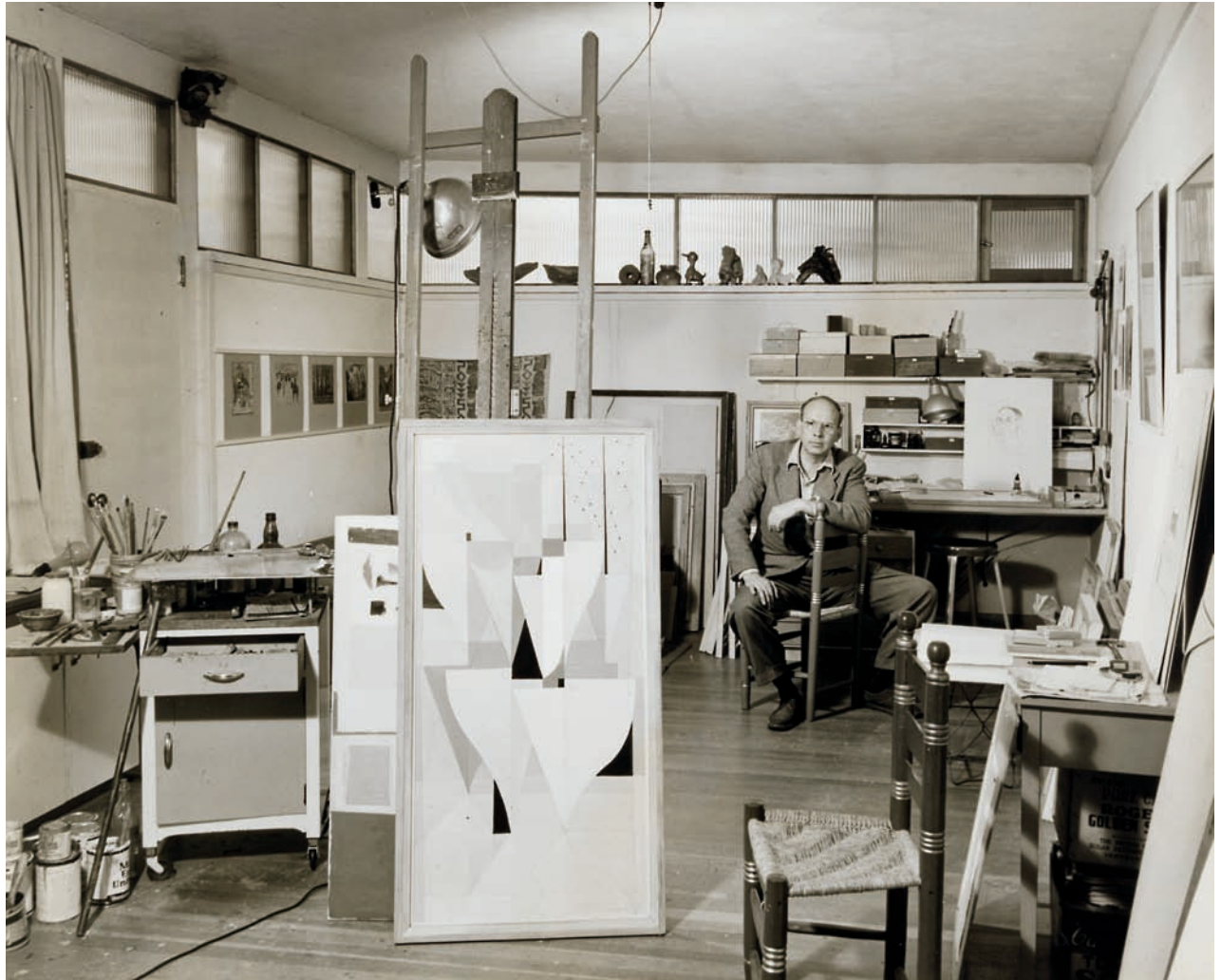


Fig. 8.5

Portrait of B.C. Binning in His Home Studio, 1950. Graham Warrington, photographer. Courtesy of the Estate of Graham Warrington. Image courtesy of the Vancouver Art Gallery Archives.

The painting in the foreground is *Ships at Quiet Anchor*, in the same vein as the work Binning showed at Venice in 1954. Binning, an architect, said that around 1948 as he took up oil painting he “began to feel greatly both the discipline of Architecture and its formal ideas: things like the flat of the picture plane, the strong boundaries of the frame, the simple strength of the truly architectural form and its relating space, the contrasting play of line, the force of colour when freed from atmosphere and effect” (quoted in Buchanan, “Exponent of a New Architecture in Paint,” 150).

non-objective painting were the contributions of the communist countries.”⁴⁰ It is easy to see how this logic would extend to other exhibitions and other years. Non-figurative painting had become part of the currency of Western cultural diplomacy.⁴¹

And in relation to “culture,” a word suddenly being used a great deal, there was the much-discussed 1951 report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, set up under Vincent Massey. The report,

which recommended creating arm's-length bodies to shape and distribute government support, was commented on by virtually every arts magazine, French and English. Opinions ranged from delight – after all, the Federation of Canadian Artists had lobbied for something like this – to anger.⁴² Some opposed the centralization of patronage under a federal government they did not trust to represent them fairly, and a few voices insisted that art should be left to a free market system. Robert Ayre noted that the general press actually “gave most of its attention to the sections devoted to radio broadcasting and the needs of the universities. Radio programmes concern more people than, for example, exhibitions of painting.”⁴³

While only some of the Massey Report's recommendations were carried out, and some only much later and for other reasons,⁴⁴ it added to a national conversation in which culture was coming to be discussed frankly as a commodity, a thing to be paid for. In 1953 *Saturday Night*, more a business journal than ever, even published a piece called “Professional Culture: A New Career,” whose writer remarked with no apparent irony that in the postwar culture boom, “poetry showed a decline but TV made up for it.”⁴⁵ This kind of talk certainly put some distance on romantic idealism and the quest for authenticity.



One wouldn't have known of the rise of non-figurative and highly abstract art from the official society shows, which still reflected the vastly overextended Group of Seven influence in English Canadian painting. Especially absent was the work of the Montreal painters, widely understood now to be the country's most important artists. This absence was generally the artists' choice. The critic Robert Ayre complained that when he was helping to organize a travelling show of Montreal painting in 1948, he couldn't get a peep out of any of the French Canadians except Pierre Gauvreau (who, as Ray Ellenwood has shown, maintained a greater openness to currents outside of the Automatise circle than did other members).⁴⁶ Borduas explained however that if paintings were to communicate and be transformative, they had to be seen not in mass exhibitions, but within their own “spiritual families,” where the eye could become acclimatized to their character.⁴⁷ In fact, smaller, more single-minded shows featuring Borduas and other French Canadians did appear in Toronto and other anglophone cities as well as in Quebec, and one such show, which included Borduas, de Tonnancour, and the Toronto artists Oscar Cahén and Jack Bush, struck the critic Lenore Crawford as having burst on the sight “with electrifying freshness. In comparison, the two previous shows – Ontario Society of Artists and the Canadian Group of Painters – remain in the memory like warmed-over hash.”⁴⁸ Although Borduas moved to New York in 1953 and then to Paris in 1955, and although *Refus global* and other Automatiste writings of the forties faded from sight during the fifties,⁴⁹ his work continued to be exhibited in these smaller shows and sold through Montreal galleries.⁵⁰ Jack Bush said later that the future Painters Eleven were inspired by seeing the Montreal painters in the small Toronto shows.⁵¹

As leading French Canadian artists were gaining visibility throughout English Canada, so was New York abstract expressionism,* and this too boosted the appetite for non-objective art. In 1953 the exhibition *American Vanguard* was sent to Vancouver from New York's Sidney Janis Gallery, with paintings by Hans Hofmann, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and others. "An extremely virile exhibition," noted the reviewer in *Canadian Art*; "the huge scale of most of its canvases added to the near violence of physical impact which made it disturbing to even the most avant-garde viewers."⁵² Vancouver painter Joe Plaskett wrote to Alexandra Luke that "certainly something needs to hit Toronto – a good *emetic* ... The Vanguard American Show here ... was such a thing ... It was big and controversial and uncompromising. Most of it I could be very critical of but it was alive, bursting at the seams."⁵³

The artist-teacher Hans Hofmann became especially important in English Canada, and Jack Shadbolt's 1951 essay on painting in British Columbia reflects this. Hofmann insisted that painting had to start in nature, however abstracted the subject became, and Shadbolt says much the same thing in his essay. When Shadbolt discusses the new "push-and-pull" space of the canvas, that too is pure Hofmann. "The space pushes forward and backward," wrote Joe Plaskett in describing Canadian artists' debt to Hofmann, "into depth and out, as well as up and down, right and left on the surface. Dry, dead elements, lines, tones and colours, at some point leap into life."⁵⁴

The statements by Alexandra Luke and Jock Macdonald below also reflect the impact of Hofmann's teaching on the future Painters Eleven in Toronto, four of whom had studied with Hofmann, including both Luke and Macdonald. And Macdonald, like Hofmann, still went to nature in his work, though he speaks of a "new concept" of nature learned from science.

Macdonald, a mentor to other members of the group, had arrived in Toronto in 1947 from British Columbia after a long practice of abstracting from nature and then, from the mid-forties, of using the automatist process (actually, a variant of automatism, Linda Jansma has observed, that comes close an idea André Breton had after a stay in the Gaspé Peninsula in 1944 that surrealism could restore connections to the natural world).⁵⁵

Macdonald complained that the Painters Eleven artists got a cold shoulder among artists such as Paraskeva Clark, who refused even to discuss art with them,⁵⁶ but in fact the group found themselves a place very quickly. The Montreal critic Rodolphe de Repentigny remarked that in Montreal, artists had recapitulated a half-century of modern art in a decade, offering their public an entire spectacle of

* Some saw this as an invasion. In *New Frontiers*, the Toronto Marxist periodical of the fifties, the writer John Albert declared that "this 'empty' and 'irrational' art is supported by a super art theory, paralleling the super imperialism of the United States. According to this theory, the art of all other countries has been superceded, and the claim is made that in the United States art has been carried forward to a new stage" ("European Realist Painters," *New Frontiers* 2, no. 2 [fall 1953]: 20).

birth, growth, and dispersion; but in Toronto, “one fine morning, one realized that nonfigurative art was solidly implanted,” and in barely three or four years the Eleven were already the senior painters.⁵⁷

But good art criticism was still lacking in English Canada. A Toronto critic remarked in 1950 that the “artistic philosophy” in Montreal was “a lot more healthy. Art is like pure science. Truth is the quest, and there is no special pleading.”⁵⁸ The Toronto artist Ronald Bloore declared that what was *not* being said in English Canadian criticism about bad work amounted to “a venomous censorship.” Reviewers had to “develop and unmercifully use a standard of judgment based upon the best works from the long history of art – not just in mild relationship to the questionable Group of Seven.”⁵⁹ This statement appeared in 1951 in the (almost exclusively English-language) national magazine *Canadian Art*, which was unfortunately part of the problem. It had lost the collective idealism and urgency of wartime and had grown terribly boring, with covers of a forced gaiety that reflected what was often an emptiness of content. Literary scholar and editor Millar MacLure said that the magazine’s exhibition reviews and features on artists sounded like the missionaries’ letters from the church paper of his youth, which always reported on the “wonderful work” being done among the natives.⁶⁰

In western Canada, as the writings reveal, things were picking up, and not only in Vancouver, where one source estimated there were four hundred serious painters working in the year 1950, and where the main art institutions – the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Vancouver School of Art, and Fine Arts and Architecture at UBC, all supported modernist tendencies.⁶¹ Artists from various western cities were showing in the east. For instance, Robert Ayre, writing in 1951 about an exhibition of nineteen mostly young western Canadian painters at the Dominion Gallery in Montreal, declared that Montreal and Toronto “no longer have a corner on culture” as far as painting was concerned.⁶² Earlier that year the Montreal critic Charles Doyon devoted a column to a Dominion Gallery show of the work of B.C. Binning, who was teaching in the School of Architecture at UBC and at the Vancouver School of Art: “Those who see his painting for the first time have trouble understanding that a painter of ultramodern work could be a professor of art in a university.”⁶³ Robert Bruce, who had won a prize in the Canadian Army Art Exhibition, returned to Winnipeg after the war and had an active life of mural and easel painting in addition to teaching.⁶⁴ Ina Uhthoff and her colleagues continued to promote the artistic growth of Victoria.

But the most memorable western Canadian art event west of Ontario at this time happened at Emma Lake in rural Saskatchewan. In 1935 a summer art school had begun there, and for hundreds of artists, mostly women and mostly teachers, this was a formative experience. As Mona Holmlund, who has studied the Emma Lake archive, explained, this was the site of the country’s first integration of art studio and art history instruction and of the country’s first artist in residence.⁶⁵ Two decades later, Kenneth Lochhead, director of the Regina College School of Art, col-

laborated with the artist Arthur McKay in setting up another kind of summer program: workshops for practising artists that would put them into contact with a larger art world through the presence of a well-known artist or critic from outside the province. The first of these workshops, in 1955, was led by Jack Shadbolt. Joe Plaskett took a turn the following year. The workshops became an international “modernist phenomenon,” as John O’Brian remarks,⁶⁶ when the organizers got into the habit of bringing in New York artists and critics, including Barnett Newman in 1959, Clement Greenberg in 1961, Kenneth Noland in 1963, and Jules Olitski in 1964. Although the history of the workshops is clearly much more complex than the famous facts about visiting New Yorkers have led us to believe, they do point to the Cold War ubiquitousness of US culture and influence, something the Massey Commission had hoped to combat.



In Montreal, the art scene grew more and more vibrant. A May 1953 exhibition now famous in Quebec art history was organized by two *Refus global* signatories, Marcelle Ferron and Fernand Leduc, together with the sculptor Robert Roussil: the *Place des artistes*. This juryless show with over eighty participants “on the second and third floors of a building surrounded by a burlesque theatre ... and greasy hot-dog restaurants” was “the most stimulating art show to hit the artistic headlines in Montreal for a long time,” according to a *Canadian Art* reviewer.⁶⁷ For the critic Rodolphe de Repentigny, it was an epic moment. The artists had put together something that rivalled or even surpassed the Art Association of Montreal’s Spring Exhibition,⁶⁸ against which the *Place des artistes* was a protest. Fernande Saint-Martin noted later that the *Place des artistes* introduced non-figurative artists who took a major step away from the Automatistes through a new emphasis on structure and colour.⁶⁹

Artist-run galleries came onto the Montreal scene. Agnès Lefort in 1950 opened the city’s first gallery for contemporary painting and sculpture,⁷⁰ and within two years, a critic found the Galerie Agnès Lefort to be “one of the main art centres of the city.”⁷¹ She showed mostly figurative artists at first but she was open to all new currents, and more and more she promoted non-objective art.⁷² In 1954 she presented Borduas’s “En route!” exhibition, the show that definitively established non-figurative painting in the city, according to the art historian Gilles Lapointe, and Lefort told Borduas that surely a thousand people saw the show.⁷³ She showed him again in 1956 and 1958. One Montreal artist remarked that Lefort’s was the only gallery on fashionable Sherbrooke Street that attracted the French Canadians, who are “at home in the place and adore the fact that they’re dealing with a human being, not simply an efficient salesman.”⁷⁴ She showed Louis Muhlstock, Marian Scott, and Fritz Brandtner, and the sculptor Anne Kahane, who had her first solo exhibition there. While she was partial to Quebec artists,⁷⁵ she also showed the Ontarians Hortense Gordon and Gordon MacNamara. Lefort even sent the work of



Fig. 8.6 Above

Front cover of pamphlet for Borduas's *En route!* show of seventeen oil paintings and six ink works at the Galerie Agnès Lefort, 1954. Fonds Paul-Émile Borduas du Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal. Courtesy of MACM.



Fig. 8.7 Right

Invitation for exhibition of Rita Letendre's work at L'Actuelle, 21 February–6 March 1956. Archives Institutionnelles, MNBAQ, Fonds Rita Letendre (P19.S3.D1.P2).

a number of her artists on a tour in 1954–55 via the Western Canada Art Circuit, a consortium of galleries in British Columbia, Alberta, and Manitoba that brought in exhibitions from the rest of Canada and the US, and thus she contributed to the spread of contemporary art throughout the country. In the brief statement below, written for a general audience, she encourages people to slow down and really contemplate the work displayed in her gallery; clearly she intended to help educate and hone the audience for new art.

Another artist-run space, L'Actuelle, the gallery of the painter Guido Molinari and the critic Fernande Saint-Martin, opened in 1955 as the only showplace in Canada for strictly non-figurative contemporary art, “in order to fight against every new academicism and to give every new plastic adventure the outlet it needs.”⁷⁶ There was also the co-operative café-gallery Échouerie, which to one reviewer looked like “the Paris cafés haunted by artists and intellectuals,” alive with animated conversation and amicable argument.⁷⁷ Rita Letendre had her first solo show at l'Échouerie, and so did the twenty-two-year-old Molinari, who had been known before this show as a poet.⁷⁸

Charles Doyon noted in 1951 that while the Librairie Tranquille (where *Refus global* was launched) had started the idea of having exhibitions in bookstores, now restaurants, theatres, and clubs were doing it too.⁷⁹



Fig. 8.8

Banner for the *Rebelles* exhibition at 2035 Mansfield Street, Montreal, 16–26 March 1950. Photographer unknown.

There was a “very great dynamism” about the show, Claude Gauvreau remembered, and “of all the collective exhibitions of the left, this was the one that attracted the most people” (Gauvreau, “L’épopée”; also in *Écrits sur l’art*, 65).

But Pierre Gauvreau concluded that all this interesting activity wasn’t enough: “If the Montreal atmosphere is traversed by more breathable currents of oxygen” than formerly, it still couldn’t sustain the *peinture vivante* that had been created there, and many who could leave, left.⁸⁰

Among the Automatistes remaining in Montreal and adding to its intellectual and artistic ferment were Claude Gauvreau and Jean-Paul Mousseau, who led the picketing of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts during a conservative 1950 Spring Exhibition (the “modern” jury was somewhat sympathetic, but anachronistic,⁸¹ according to Marcelle Ferron), and who were mostly responsible for the protest exhibition *Les rebelles*.⁸² In the spring of 1954 Claude Gauvreau organized *La matière chante*, an exhibition of two dozen artists at a private gallery. Borduas returned from New York to select the paintings, and many Automatistes exhibited there; it was understood that this would be their last appearance as a group. Important newcomers were also present at the show, including Rita Letendre and other women artists who were finding their own way in a male-dominated scene. These artists remained independent of a clear polarity that now existed between the Automatistes and certain artists moving toward strict structure and colour.⁸³

Although France remained important to Montreal artists – not so much the source of *art vivant* that it had been during the war, but a centre of thought and critical standards – New York was the transformative place for Borduas as for some young Montreal artists. Borduas’s show at the Galerie Agnès Lefort took place only one year after he moved to New York, but Pierre Gauvreau claimed that one had to learn to read all over again to understand this new work; the previous vocabulary no longer held.⁸⁴ And Borduas now looked at the works in a 1955 Montreal exhibition, *Espace 55*, and found them archaic – the automatist as well as the more structured work. Fernand Leduc published an angry response: “Borduas advocates



Fig. 8.9

Denise Colomb, *Riopelle in His Paris Studio*, 1953. Series: Portraits of artists. © Denise Colomb-RMN. 9136t02998. Ministère de la Culture/Médiathèque du Patrimoine/Denise Colomb/dist.RMN/Art Resource, NY.

Riopelle became the most visible of all the Canadian artists who moved to Paris after the war (who included, temporarily or permanently, Marcelle Ferron, Fernand Leduc, Thérèse Renaud, Alfred Pellan, and eventually, Borduas). Jock Macdonald, visiting France in 1954, observed that Riopelle was considered “to be exceedingly important. It is good to know that a Canadian has hit the high spots in France” (Macdonald, letter to Maxwell Bates, 26 December 1954, J.W.G. Macdonald Papers). The artist and gallery owner Agnès Lefort said that all of Paris was talking about Riopelle, and “New York too – but not Montreal” (Lefort, “La peinture canadienne d’expression française,” 18).

for an international art – his own,”⁸⁵ and Borduas in turn published in *L'Autorité* a position statement he had written for the Borduas/Jack Bush/Oscar Cahén/Jacques de Tonnancour exhibition that was on in London, Ontario.⁸⁶ Borduas responded to Leduc's article with a formal letter⁸⁷ – the fact that a newspaper published it is fascinating evidence of how seriously art was taken by a certain public – and the two ended their relationship.

Guido Molinari, still in his early twenties, joined this conversation and addressed Borduas's position statement in his article “The Tachiste Space or the Automatist Situation”, also published in *L'Autorité*. Borduas had said that Pollock, exasperated by not knowing how to express the intensity of an undefinable emotion, took the “magnificent risk” of giving free rein to his passion, and the resulting infinite multiplication of accident showed itself capable of expressing “at once physical reality and psychic quality.”⁸⁸ But Molinari had no interest in psychic quality. His concern was structure. Space was central to that concern; after all, the fate of Western art since the Renaissance is bound to space. He concluded however that Borduas was right in saying that the Montreal Automatistes had isolated themselves from the larger development of art through their long dialogue with surrealism and its “ethico-aesthetic” goals. The New York abstract expressionists, and Borduas in his new work, took account of the evolution from Cézanne and cubism through Mondrian and created a space with unlimited potential – an aspect of the universal. Another ending of the romantic – not what the abstract expressionists and Borduas did in New York, but what Molinari made of them. Art to him was no longer an effort to wed oneself to the universe. The task was just as exacting, but the goal had changed.

A new group emerged now in Montreal, the Plasticiens. There was another manifesto, issued at the café Échouerie, where they had their first show. The four artists who signed this manifesto took a workmanlike approach to structure and colour, and they, like Guido Molinari, opposed the idea that the unconscious was a creative source. The greatest possible emphasis was put on the picture surface, without reference to objects or to natural space, and this carries to a logical extreme the modernist notion of the picture as an object in its own right. But still, the Plasticiens did not consider their work coldly rational. Roald Nasgaard explained with great clarity that if their paintings are “existential acts of discovery, the kind of knowledge they drew from came not from scientific or mathematical calculations, but was rooted definitively in human intuition.”⁸⁹ This is what they tried to get across in their manifesto.

What remained through all the intense theoretical debating and artistic searching in Montreal was the sense that artists must renew themselves constantly through rigorous contact with contemporary intellectual currents. This tough-minded intellectual-artistic work was unique in Canada.



In 1956, Pierre Gauvreau said, “Ten years ago, the modern painter felt alone in the Canadian social context. In fact, he was alone, and terribly. It is normal that his social activity was above all ‘anti.’ He had to overturn too many false idols shamefully placed on the altars of art. Today, this work is mostly done. What remains is inconsequential and doesn’t bother anyone. Rid of these exhausting provocations, the contemporary Canadian painter can turn toward positive activity.”⁹⁰ While he spoke from the Montreal perspective, his statement had a much wider validity.



During those early Cold War years, then – years of economic security for many and emotional insecurity for all – the romantic receded. The spiritual in art, including the exploratory kind that Charles Taylor spoke of, was seen far less often. It was no longer possible for artists such as Molinari and the Plasticiens to go to the human soul or the psyche to find a “weighty enough meaning to life in humanist terms,” as Taylor put it,⁹¹ to replace the absolute. In that light *Refus global* seems a final apocalyptic gesture of idealism.

One could no longer assume – and of course never should have – that there was a cultural unity in which art’s meanings were timeless and universal. This could now be spoken of directly. Jack Shadbolt commented in 1953 that “we have no conviction about a set of durable symbols in which our whole society has a common belief.”⁹² The optimistic notion of a national art was long gone, and it was an understatement when Donald Buchanan said that “our painters as well as our writers have begun to doubt that we can build undisturbed any obvious or fixed Canadian pattern in this world of flux.”⁹³ Julien Hébert asked, “If we, as communities, were to review our deepest convictions could we find any or even one which could stand the trial of sculpture? Which of our collective attitudes would we dare have presented thus in the face of many generations to come?”⁹⁴ The writer Miriam Waddington observed that “excellence in the arts, in citizenship, and in heroic deeds can only be attained where there is a public realm as the Greeks conceived it; immortality requires this same political-public space. Otherwise we have only private life on a large scale.”⁹⁵

But it was a good thing, this dawning sense that one’s work could not speak for an entire people. Of course, the whole period explored in this book is marked by movement away from narrow nationalism toward an increasingly relativistic and international outlook. Barbara Jenkins argues that in fact Canadian cultural leaders were always aware of Canada’s place in the progress of Western “civilization,” and that in itself was an internationalizing element.⁹⁶ There were artists before this moment who had tried consciously from their very particular perspectives to think globally: Lawren Harris and the Theosophists, the leftists of the Spanish Civil War era, Borduas and the Automatistes. But the point is that the later texts I have just cited acknowledge frankly, and in terms that we recognize today, how much cultural realities vary from one person and group to another. The most striking evidence of

this awareness actually came from Agnès Lefort: writing on France as the source for Canadian art, she said, “I have a profound admiration for the splendid art of the Indians of Vancouver, but we have taken nothing from the Indian but his lands and his liberty.”⁹⁷

The brief articles that James Houston published from 1951 in *Beaver*, *Canadian Art*, *The Studio*, *Eskimo Bulletin*, and other magazines both illustrate and complicate the matter of cultural relativity. He worked with Inuit carvers in the Arctic to develop what soon became an industry, as he himself describes it in his 1952 article “In Search of Contemporary Eskimo Art.” His collaborations with Inuit people made it even more true than previously that Inuit works of art are “export” commodities, produced for *Quallunaat*, outsiders. Ingo Hessel remarks that because this is the context for Inuit art, it is all the more astonishing that “so much art of high quality, unmistakable integrity, and emotional and psychological impact have been created.”⁹⁸

Inuit people had traded with white travellers for a good three centuries, and Heather Igloliorte sets that history into the context of Inuit sovereignty within the assimilation-oriented liberal Canadian state.⁹⁹ In the twentieth century, Inuit art was coming to the attention of *Quallunaat* with greater and greater interest. For instance, in 1915 Robert Flaherty, soon to make the famous documentary *Nanook of the North*, published a portfolio of splendid drawings from the winter of 1913–14 by Enooesweetok, one of Flaherty’s expedition guides.¹⁰⁰ In 1927 an anthropologist came upon five ivory carvings from northern Labrador that “represent something of a new problem in the art history of the polar regions.”¹⁰¹ To him the carvings were – art. In 1930 the Canadian Handicrafts Guild held an exhibition of Inuit art at the McCord Museum in Montreal. Beginning in that decade also, Peter Pitseolak had a remarkable career as a photographer in the area of Kingait, Nunavut, a career well known to the outside world. But with the onset of the Cold War and the militarization of the Canadian Arctic by the US and Canada, a new political rationale for recognizing Inuit art emerged: it became part of an effort to assert Canada’s own sovereignty and control over this land.¹⁰² With James Houston, a full-on effort to bring Inuit art to the southern markets began.

What are we to make of Houston? He lived in the Arctic for more than a decade and learned Inuktitut and considered some of the artists his friends, but he had the early modernist’s concern for “authenticity” (a concern also voiced in the fifties by Guy Viau, who wrote of the Inuit, “such pure, but such fragile gifts of these ingenuous beings, will they not be spoiled by contact with our civilization?”)¹⁰³ Houston generalized about Inuit art but must be credited with making a practice of using the artists’ names. He called their work art, but he also called it craft, industry, and primitive work. He said in a 1951 article that “many prominent critics believe that our [note the possessive] Eskimos of the Eastern Arctic are producing Canada’s finest contemporary art, and that every attempt must be made to encourage and maintain their individuality,”¹⁰⁴ but in that same year he wrote, for distribution in

the north, the instructional booklet *Sunuyuksuk: Eskimo Handicrafts*, which was more than a little directive about the kinds of craft objects the Inuit might make (it ultimately failed and Houston returned to promoting Inuit art as art).¹⁰⁵ In “In Search of Contemporary Eskimo Art” he praises Inuit artists as “Canada’s liveliest arts group” and summarizes his first involvement with them. I myself find that Houston’s writing shows much greater cultural awareness and respect for the artists than was seen, for instance, in writings related to the 1927 exhibition *West Coast Art – Native and Modern*, to name a prominent Canadian example.

Marshall McLuhan’s writing too was very much part of the Cold War conversation about culture, but along very different lines. For him, the analysis of post-war mass media became a life project. As big a splash as his book *Understanding Media* made when it came out in 1964, McLuhan had already been writing on culture and mass media in Toronto for more than ten years. Such periodicals as *International Journal*, *Saturday Night*, and *Queen’s Quarterly* had carried McLuhan’s articles,¹⁰⁶ but his ideas were most at home in *Explorations: Studies in Culture and Communication*, the experimental interdisciplinary journal published in nine numbers at the University of Toronto from 1953 to 1959. McLuhan, who was teaching English literature at the U of T, worked as associate editor for the first six numbers, and wrote an article for each of those numbers. The magazine’s editor was the U of T anthropologist Edmund Carpenter, McLuhan’s friend and an iconoclast like him: “Our exchanges were like Lenny Bruce and jazzmen doing rap sessions, where Bruce would tell five jokes at once ... People listening to it were appalled.”¹⁰⁷

By 1954, when he published “Notes on the Media as Art Forms”, in *Explorations*, McLuhan had concluded that “the well-established view of culture which assumes that it filters down from elites to popular levels,” a view he found naive to start with, was giving way to an exploration of the very processes of culture formation and of the media as collective “art forms.” Vastly broadening the term “art” – and this had huge connotations for the future – McLuhan insisted that each of the media has a form that is distinctive and powerful, and each selects and limits its own view of the world, transforming and partly overshadowing its content. It is fascinating that McLuhan takes us back in this article to Cézanne’s legacy. Doesn’t McLuhan’s famous maxim “the medium is the message” echo the great modernist notion of significant form?

McLuhan’s study of the processes of culture formation is closely related to the larger project of *Explorations*, as guided by Edmund Carpenter: to explore each culture in terms of its own realities, its own values. Other societies were as “civilized” as our own, and to be studied as such from within their own contexts. In the words of Marshall McLuhan, this cultural equality was the “principal insight of this century to date.”¹⁰⁸ No longer was it appropriate simply to admire the “timeless” form of a native carving, co-opting it into one’s own context of ideas. One must instead recognize the complex of meanings each work had for the cul-

ture that produced it. The eighth number of *Explorations* was a beautifully produced book in its own right: *Eskimo*, mainly based on Edmund Carpenter's experience of having spent the winter 1951–52 with the Aivilik in the Kivalliq Region of Hudson's Bay.

The attitude to culture shown in these early fifties writings was only starting to take shape, and most of the serious writing on the subject came later. But something of a turning point had been reached. Of course this attitude is not yet fully in place today. But the recognition of cultural diversity on which Canada now prides itself, sometimes justly, had real beginnings in that era.

COLD WAR CULTURE: ARTISTS' AND CRITICS' WRITINGS

The first documents in this section are statements by two Maritimes artists, Miller Brittain and Alex Colville. Both had direct experience of war, and each expresses a deeply felt need to go on engaging with recognizable human subjects and the human body while more and more non-objective art was coming out of the art world. Perhaps the writer who called Colville's paintings "windows of order and determined calm"¹⁰⁹ described them best.

These two statements are followed by one from the art dealer Agnès Lefort, which I include to emphasize the importance of private galleries and their ideologies to what was happening in the art world, and the importance of Lefort in particular to contemporary art in Montreal.

Next is an excerpt from Jack Shadbolt's overview of the painting scene in British Columbia, in which he describes a loose but important tendency among artists who abstracted forms from nature. He had been teaching at the Vancouver School of Art since 1938 and considered himself the main force for modern art in that scene. His own work, which had been much affected by his war experiences and by seeing Graham Sutherland's work in England, was of course part of that tendency, and two of the artists who get his highest praise here, Donald Jarvis and Molly Lamb Bobak, had studied with him. Shadbolt also recognized a debt to Hans Hofmann, as I mentioned above. In this article he takes a theoretical shortcut in saying that "forms in relation to space equals man in relation to society"; but he does argue from a sincere sense of the need for art to be up to the minute in its engagement with a difficult and uncertain world.

Then, a series of texts that reflect the prominence of non-objective art in the fifties. The first two were written for the 1952 Canadian Abstract Exhibition by Alexandra Luke and Jock Macdonald. They are brief – public writing was not a pre-occupation for these Ontario artists as it was in Montreal – but they reflect the artists' intention to educate a new public. The two statements reveal that art is still a romantic quest for these painters, and that Macdonald still sees art as movement toward higher spiritual levels, as he had explained more fully in a 1940 speech "Art

in Relation to Nature.” In fact he sounds very like that earlier romantic Kandinsky when he says that “each century of art produces stepping stones to a higher knowledge of a spiritual essence.”¹¹⁰ Luke had long promoted art in early modernist terms: when the president of the Royal Canadian Academy attacked a 1933 exhibition she published a statement saying that modern art’s “medium, colour, is as elemental as sound and when properly presented is as capable of engendering aesthetic emotion as is music.”¹¹¹

The third and fourth texts on the non-objective are the manifesto of the *Plasticiens* and Guido Molinari’s “The Tachiste Space or the Automatist Situation,” both from 1955. The geometric non-objective painters of Montreal who were gathered under the name “*Plasticiens*” worked toward removing not only references to objects from the natural world but also natural space as represented by object–ground relationships. Molinari’s piece came out a few months after the first exhibition of the *Plasticiens*; Molinari would quickly become part of the second *Plasticien* wave (though he found the show for which their March 1955 manifesto was written to be a little behind the times).¹¹² For him, a fascination with theories of perception and especially those of Jean Piaget reinforced this direction.¹¹³ The level of theoretical rigour in Molinari’s article, and the confidence that the public cares, are astonishing. Imagine any English Canadian publication then – or now – carrying such a piece routinely. But Molinari began and pursued his career within a Montreal critical tradition that made such writing possible.

I conclude with excerpts from James Houston’s “In Search of Contemporary Eskimo Art” and Marshall McLuhan’s “Notes on the Media as Art Forms.” As different as they are in approach and content, each mirrors the changed attitudes toward culture that I have described.

Miller Brittain, “A Note by the Artist,” 1949*

Brittain distilled this statement from a talk he gave at his 1949 New Brunswick Museum retrospective show, where he remarked that in a distracted age of “kitchen gadgets and atomic bombs” it took conscious effort for people to get to know art.¹¹⁴

One experiences life and reacts to it in a variety of ways. I must try to find the right way. That is my aim in art and life and my work embodies the struggle. The beauty of the drama of inanimate nature moves me deeply, but the trials, the errors, the absurd antics and the triumphs of Everyman affect me more. In my early work I attempted to record what passed before me with truth and humour. Now while more acutely conscious than ever of the rich and varied texture of human life, I do not wish so much to record it as to let it work on me, and the resulting

* Miller Brittain, “A Note by the Artist,” *Northern Review* (Toronto) 2, no. 6 (August–September 1949): 20.

visual image may take quite another form from the circumstance that prompted it. For instance an impression I receive of domestic felicity, may emerge as a picture of Adam and Eve visited by angels. I have drawn freely from the human emotional drama of the Bible, partly because of its picturesqueness, but mainly because it is played out against the conception of a suffering and triumphant God. Most often I do not begin with an idea of any kind but merely play with shape and colour, allowing the forms to emerge as they will. Here is where I quarrel with non-objective painting which seems to me to stop half-way by not joining hands with the natural world and man's experience. I believe that all thoughts and feelings are grist to the painter's mill and hate and fear as well as love have been my themes when I have felt them. Are the non-objective boys too pure to come to terms with nasty humanity? There is a sentence of Milton's (transcribed from Aristotle) apropos of the above remarks which I believe to be worth quoting: "... by raising pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of those and such-like passions ... with a kind of delight stirred up by reading or seeing those passions well-imitated."*

Along with the development of the artist's thought must go the expansion of his technical means[†] which is an ever-rewarding experience in itself. I have had many thrills by the adventurous use of colour to intensify my message, and by the search for new means to make my forms vibrate and move. These things compensate when other rewards seem to be lacking.

Alex Colville, Statement, 1951[‡]

Depending, I suppose, upon a painter's personality and environment, he will reject the world and produce a pure and spiritual art of the mind, or he will accept the world and draw his art from earthly reality. Few artists have followed either extreme course of action but many, with personalities formed by a great culture, finding themselves in an environment to which they could not be sympathetic and which perhaps filled them with despair, have understandably turned toward a pure and unearthly art form. Such a course would be unnatural, and in fact impossible, for me; I want to declare the value and significance of the objective world, and the way for me to do this is by representational painting.

Although a painting is derived from experience, it must exist as a thing in itself, an end, not a means. Now obviously abstract painting meets this requirement, but when representational paintings are viewed by the public they may be regarded as mediums for examining life, mere panes of glass. In order to

* Milton was speaking of classical tragedy and of how it got its power (quoted in Allan H. Gilbert, *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1962), 592–3).

† He had begun using pastel, mixing it with gouache, tempera, pencil, and other media to get a more immediate approach and a richer surface than his previous oil-and-tempera method allowed.

‡ Alex Colville, statement in *Canadian Art* 8, no. 4 (summer 1951): 163. Copyright A.C. Fine Art Inc. This statement followed Avery Shaw's short piece on Colville, "Towards a Personal Realism," 162.

overcome this difficulty, and because an artist must conceive as well as perceive if he is to present the full implications of his subject, I work in an indirect way. By painting largely “out of my head” and by using an arduous technique I aim to produce paintings which are constructions on a flat surface, each with an individual identity.

Most of us agree that the art of the past changes or influences the art of today, just as today’s art changes the art of the past. We differ, though, when we indicate the past art which is particularly meaningful to us. To me, for instance, Italian painting of the earlier fifteenth century is more interesting than European painting from 1910 to 1940. I regard the situation which produced the School of Paris art as just as remote, and unlike our situation, as that which produced Masaccio and Piero della Francesca: neither of them apply by any means completely to us, but to me the latter painters are more significant. Artists often react against the work of the generation before them – I have no inclination to work in the tradition established by the leading European painters of this century.

Agnès Lefort, from “Reflections of a Picture Seller,” 1951*

Agnès Lefort had a long history in the art world. She began to exhibit in Montreal and internationally in the mid-twenties but had put aside her painting to write French-language radio scripts during the war and had been one of the few French Canadian artists attending the 1941 Kingston Conference.¹¹⁵ She painted and exhibited again from the end of the war until 1950, when she opened her gallery.

“To display is vital, the *sine qua non* for the artist since, after some reflection, viewers become accustomed to what was once surprising, even shocking. Little by little, the artwork is appreciated and acknowledged.”

This sentence, taken from Manet’s correspondence, describes accurately the reason for the existence of my art gallery, which I often open evenings and Sundays in order to let busy people come during their free hours so they can contemplate and familiarize themselves with the avant-garde art that I represent. For many it is shocking, and for those who look for art in everything that is outside art – the nostalgia of the *déjà vu* or the panoramic cliché so dear to their fathers – it is hermetic. Are we to conclude that we are dealing with lazy minds?

“History,” says Focillon, “is generally a conflict among what is precocious, actual, and delayed ... The history of art juxtaposes within one moment survival, anticipation, and slow outdated forms that are contemporaries of bold rapid forms.” Is this not too complex for the general public to understand and respond to in a straightforward manner? To make the bridge between the art of the primi-

* Agnès Lefort, from “Réflexions d’un marchand de tableaux,” *Nouvelle Revue Canadienne* 1, no. 3 (June–July 1951): 74–5. Translation © Lola Lemire Tostevin.



Fig. 8.10

Borduas with Agnès Lefort at her gallery. In an article by Paul Gladu, *Le Petit Journal*, Montreal, 12 August 1956. Jeanne Brisebois scrapbook, Collection of the Library and Archives, National Gallery of Canada.

tive who made religious art by painting moral beliefs, and the expressive hieroglyphs or abstract designs packed with evocative lyricism from avant-garde artists, is a difficult task for those who are uninitiated to the mysteries of an art requiring much thought and an acute sense of plastic equivalents.

I believe, in this century of the automobile, that the art of thinking is what is most lacking for the public's understanding of art today. How many people have walked by paintings barely glancing at them, content to say, "I don't understand?" How can we pretend to understand art if we don't feel it, if we don't let ourselves be affected by what we have seen? The receptiveness we bring to listening to a concert should not be less for the contemplation of a work of art.

Jack Shadbolt, from “Recent British Columbia Paintings and the Contemporary Tradition,” 1951*

Assuming that he is aware of the idiom of abstraction, one would hazard a guess that the factor which puts an artist philosophically nearest in touch with the core theme of our present period is his intuitive recognition of the picture area as a void of solitude across which forms are reaching to touch tips in human communion. Their reaching and stretching, their gesticulating to attract one another across intervening space is the secret paraphrase of our need to commune across the vast, uncertain reaches of our spiritual insecurity, of our longing to clasp hands in the reassurance of a collective belief. This essential meaning of “open form” seems to reside in the fact that objects as such, are not entirely sealed off by enclosed contours but rather play in equal give-and-take with the negative shapes of the ground that are created around and between them – that in their convex parts they expand outward toward other objects and in their concave parts they receive inward, and sometimes embrace, the pressures exerted by the negative shapes from outside.[†] To achieve this maximum interdependence between positive and negative is the secret of meaningful relationships and when this can be achieved consistently across the whole picture surface in the light of a major, declared pictorial structure the largest implications may accrue. This present concept of form tends to lay the stress on the side-to-side relationships rather than on the perspectival overlapping depth relationships of objects receding in normal vision, and under its impetus artists are learning to translate from normal vision into terms of the flat surface as though, for example, a flower were considered after being pressed in a book rather than as growing. One kind of life, nature, has been taken out of the object by this process, but a new kind has entered in. The flower has now taken on the abstraction of a remembered and contemplated form – not with the horror of a wax flower, which still falsely tries to give the illusion of reality, but with the more austere beauty of compassionate dissection.

To be aware of this idiomatic translation from nature to the present terms of our abstraction is what makes an artist philosophically valid for us and from then on his stature depends on his capacity to re-humanize this equation by moving

* Jack Shadbolt, from “Recent British Columbia Paintings and the Contemporary Tradition,” *Journal, Royal Architectural Institute of Canada*, serial no. 316, vol. 28, no. 12 (December 1951): 376–83 (excerpt from pages 377–8). The article was preceded by Robert Ayre’s “Montreal and Points East” (362–9) and R. York Wilson, “From Ontario’s Eastern Border to the Rockies” (370–5). Reproduced with permission of Simon Fraser University and RAIC.

[†] Shadbolt adds a note: “The ‘open form’ principle of relationship in painting is paralleled by ‘free association’ in literature and ‘space articulation’ in modern architecture. It is not only a way of relating forms but is an assistance in generating their spontaneous originality since the forms evolve not entirely by pre-conception but grow by virtue of adjustments to their negative surrounding spaces, just as in free association ideas suggest further ideas.”

back to nature through its formal restrictions – for each generation has to learn again the bitter paradox of how to depart from nature only to return to it – to move between life and the intellectual form of its time.

Now, since the delineation of full volume contains at once the greatest implication of actuality and the most complex intellectualization of concept, it is suggested that the “return to life” through the demands of our present form is indexed by the ability to imply the complexities of depth and bulk without violating the flat picture plane. Slowly we are increasing this demand upon our serious artists and it is those who have compensated for our loss of actual volume by the tangible push-and-pull of color volumes in space whose emotional dimension is quite beyond mere patterning or surface design. For volume is a formal ingredient indispensable to an implied larger reality.

There is, too, a new psychological ingredient to be mastered in our contemporary pictorial design. Now that foreground, middle distance and distance have vanished into the impersonal timelessness of the picture plane the emphasis is shifted onto how much vertical or lateral space one can induce between top and bottom or between the two sides of the picture and how much dramatic meaning or symbolic portent one can induce between above and below, or between left and right, conceiving the centre area (and forms) of the canvas as protagonist between these forces. Whether forms climb from the region below to the region above in this space world, whether they sit squarely and boldly across the face of the canvas, stretching the space horizontally, or whether they are the seismic crackle of a Mark Tobey’s white writing across the grey internal silence, they convey a dramatic response to space. Each personal variant of open form, whether the forms send out their snarling angular dynamics to breach the space and violently grasp at other forms or whether the blind forms approach gingerly across the open void with slender feelers exposed for tremors from other friendly or hostile forms, whether they dance or throb or cling flat to the impervious surface, they are the index of the deep personal reaction to the fundamental equation – forms in relation to space equals man in relation to society. One observes that those who are intimately involved see the world as a microcosm and an endless cross sectional process, whilst those who are detached seem to view their formal drama from a greater distance as elements organized toward a definite climactic structure.

It seems safe to suggest that the least successful attainments just now are those of violent approach. The nature of our balance today is not one of confident externality and healthy assurance, but rather of hesitant uncertainty and, at best, intellectual humility and quiet hope in the dim-out.

Alexandra Luke and Jock Macdonald, statements from *Canadian Abstract Exhibition, 1952**

Alexandra Luke as organizer of the Canadian Abstract Exhibition wanted it to be truly representative of the country's abstract art. She managed to attract only one French Canadian artist, Léon Bellefleur,¹¹⁶ but the show did become significant as the beginning of the Painters Eleven group: all of its artists except Kazuo Nakamura and Walter Yarwood were in it, and all of the seven statements in the exhibition brochure were by future members.

Alexandra Luke

My experience is that more beauty and interest is to be found in the negative space created by the object than in the positive. The painting thus created must have a vital breathing quality and carry with it the mystery of creation. This important quality cannot be so readily sustained if the painting is dominated by story telling, a figure or an object.

Painting should not stop with the already discovered beauty, but should continue searching. I think the artist should grow spiritually with his work so that each year, through thought and struggle, his progress should show an unfolding and not mere repetition of his former works.

J. W. Macdonald

Our concepts about nature, space, and time have brought into being a new form of consciousness. The abstract artist is expressing his inner vision of this new form of awareness.

The new concepts of space cannot be expressed through the former illusion of visual perspective. In abstract art the "space" is created through the energies and tensions realized by the direction of lines and planes, the movement of inter-related forms, surface qualities of texture and especially through the spatial qualities of colour.

An artist must seek to discover new forms of beauty. If not, an arrestment occurs and art becomes a superfluous aestheticism. The abstract artist has created a new form of beauty.

The artist intuitively knows that the former concepts regarding nature are no longer true, and that the visual world is an illusion of reality. He is like the physicist who used to borrow raw material of his world from the visual world, but he does so no longer. "The external world of physics has thus become a world of shadows. In removing our illusions, we have removed the substance,

* Alexandra Luke and Jock Macdonald, statements in the brochure *Canadian Abstract Exhibition, Opened at Oshawa Y.W.C.A. October 1952* (South Ontario Galleries, 1952).

for indeed we have seen that the substance is one of the greatest of our illusions.” (Eddington)*

Therefore, it is understandable that the abstract artist expresses in his work these growing universal concepts.

Manifesto of the Plasticiens, 1955[†]

The art critic Françoise de Repentigny explained later that the manifesto was a sort of synthesis, edited by her husband, of the casual discussions the artists had among themselves when they met to exchange ideas.¹¹⁷ Rodolphe de Repentigny was a highly respected critic and theorist who wrote for La Presse from 1952 to 1959 and for the liberal newspaper L'Autorité 1953–59;¹¹⁸ he showed a wide range of sympathies in his reviews of Montreal exhibitions, but at this point he exhibited work under the name of Jauran among the highly disciplined paintings of the Plasticiens.

The Plasticiens are painters who came together when they discovered that the similarity of their paintings was due to their pictorial approach, how they function as painters, and their attitudes toward painting and society.

As the name they chose for their group indicates, it is, above all, how elements in their work relate to plasticity, to which Plasticiens devote themselves: tone, texture, colours, forms, lines, the links among these elements and the final unity of a painting. It is assumed that these elements are ends in themselves.

This concept on which their painting is based doesn't require justification; it is found instead in its banal appearance: Plasticiens paint because they like what is particular to painting. The concept, moreover, is compatible with the isolated freedom of the artist in a contemporary world.

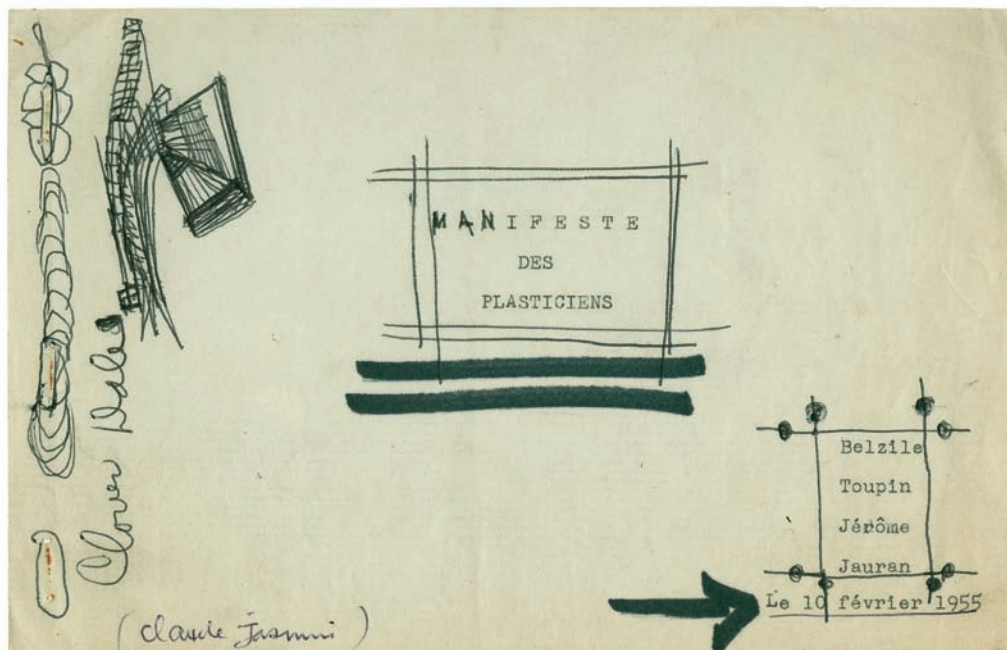
Having reached a more or less total rejection of the romantic attitude of painting as a means of conscious expression, the Plasticiens are able to regain the artisanal simplicity that characterizes the absence of arrogance so often associated with a limited awakening of self-awareness.

The canvases of the Plasticiens are not expressions of choice but of basic needs, of inevitable obsessions and transcendental reduction. The level of knowledge of these painters, both in their origins and their unity is, in the final analysis, that of intuition rather than science. If their needs appear more logical than intuitive, it is because the simplification of their methods leads to pared-down results which, admittedly, exclude personality.



* The British physicist and philosopher of science Arthur Eddington, in *The Nature of the Physical World* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), xvi.

[†] *Manifeste des plasticiens*, Montreal, 15 February 1955. Translation © Lola Lemire Tostevin.



La portée du travail des Plasticiens est dans l'épurement incessant des éléments plastiques et de leur ordre; leur destin est typiquement la révélation de formes parfaites dans un ordre parfait.

Leur destin et non pas leur but, étant donné qu'ils travaillent dans l'amour du moment présent.

Les Plasticiens n'admettent pas la postulation a priori de ce qui est élémentaire et de ce qui est parfait. Pour eux, ce ne sont pas là des données, mais des acquisitions que seul le travail

Figs. 8.11a and 8.11b

Cover and page of text, *Manifeste des plasticiens*, 1955. Signed by Claude Jasmin, one of the artists. Fonds Claude Jasmin, MSS470, Bibliothèque et Archives Nationales du Québec. Image courtesy of BANQ.

The full significance of the Plasticiens' work lies in the persistent perfecting of plastic elements and their order; typically, their destiny is the revelation of perfect forms in a perfect order.

Because they work for the love of the present moment, it is not a goal but a destiny.

Plasticiens do not acknowledge a postulation a priori as to what is elementary and perfect. For them this is not a given and can only be achieved through work done independently and in complete freedom. Their discoveries may coincide with other discoveries, but even then they do not believe they have stumbled upon an objective truth.

Plasticiens are not preoccupied with possible meaning in their work, at least not consciously. However, without assigning literal meaning to their painting, they do not exclude possible unconscious implications, reflecting thereby their own humanity.

On the whole Plasticiens obey the natural world, and this is why their paintings lean toward complete autonomy as objects.

Plasticiens do not pretend to bring an entirely new or consistent appearance to their work. It was Malraux who wrote that paintings are born from other paintings. Even the purest intuition expresses itself, to some degree, through the intermediary of memory.

The work of the Plasticiens is being inscribed into the history of art in Canada, more specifically in Montreal. From the very first automatist exhibitions, non-figurative painting acquired its distinguished place in Montreal. It might have been born elsewhere but, in fact, it was born here. It is in the revolutionary seeds sown by Borduas that the Plasticiens found solutions to problems posed in their desire to paint.

The Renaissance freed the arts from subjection to spiritual ritual. The great and diverse movements of the nineteenth century, then finally Dadaism, surrealism and automatism freed the arts from subjection to a materialist ritual. Mondrian helped reduce the ultimate alienation of the painting, the display of concentration on the self.

Plasticien Aphorisms

The genuine role of the artist is to generate a desire for truth. In making a work of art public, its meaning is always distorted. Moreover, its appearance in the world should always coincide, as much as this is possible, with its creation.

Where the public is concerned it is essential to create an unsettling frame of mind towards the arts, and not simply a familiarity that incurs contempt.

Only anguish remains of the spiritual.

In 1955 there is no sacred art; art is in itself sacred.

Creativity, which is also intuition, is the only form of truth.

All true art is respectable in its integrity.

All art is respectable in its integrity which, when conveyed to the viewer's own intuition, proves that it is genuinely true for its creator.

This is what is known as love for thy neighbour, acknowledging the existence of the other.

A work of art is not necessarily the creation of the person who made it, but of someone or a group who simply look at it.

This form of existence is what makes a work of art respectable.

A work of art can be the moment of truth of a people, of a civilization.

Taste, propensity, acceptance, however, cannot be the criteria for truth: only intuitive intuition [l'institution intuitionnée] is.

The Plasticiens

Belzile, J-P Jérôme, F Toupin, Jauran

Guido Molinari, from "The Tachiste Space or the Automatist Situation," 1955*

The disagreement between the Borduas paintings of New York and Leduc of Montreal originated in the specific developments of automatism in the United States and Canada. In order to understand the different characteristics of these two automatisms, it is necessary to set aside purely subjective opinions as far as the plastic arts are concerned, and establish a clear-cut definition of this pictorial composition.

The fate of the plastic arts is effectively bound to the structure of pictorial space. In the Occident, since the Renaissance, it was first linked to the triumph, then to the destruction of the illusion of Euclidian perspective which upheld natural space in painting. A plastic work which would maintain the qualities of natural space could, today, be qualified as classic instead of archaic.

Canadian automatism, fascinated by the ethico-esthetic possibilities of surrealism, became interested in the pictorial experiences within the spatial structures upheld by surrealism and characterized by the potential uses of three-dimensional space.

Surrealism thereby created a kind of small island in the evolution of a universal plastic art. Furthermore, the isolation of Canadian artists, due mainly to the lack of contact with the *peinture vivante* of the world, has contributed to the preservation of a certain local character to the works produced during these last decades.

* Guido Molinari, from "L'espace tachiste ou situation de l'automatisme," *L'Autorité*, 2 April 1955. Translation © Lola Lemire Tostevin.



Fig. 8.12

Guido Molinari in front of a work by Jean Paul Riopelle (Sans titre 1947, to his right) during the installation of the inaugural exhibition of galerie L'Actuelle (1955–1957), May 1955. Photo by Robert Millet. Image courtesy of Fondation Guido Molinari.

Cut off from the dynamic evolution of the plastic arts, Canadian automatism saw its projective possibilities limited to the utilization of the notion of the “object” in three-dimensional space.

Such was not the case for American automatism. Also known as abstract expressionism, American automatism puts forward a completely different configuration since it originated in possibilities recognized as the development of plastic arts from cubism to Mondrian.

Furthermore, if it was possible to see a universal movement in the New York School it was due mainly to the fact that it transcends even the neoplastic pictorial concepts posed by Mondrian.

This is why, judging from the pictorial production in our midst in terms of the dynamism of the Americans, Mr Borduas’s recent stance is viable, for it inscribes itself within the evolutionary movement of painting.

There is greater anguish and a more profound universalism to take into account than to lose interest in the tragic developments of painting. In order to be universal, art should not be defined solely in relation to man vis-à-vis the universe in general, but in relation to man vis-à-vis the plastic universe in particular.

The Fragmentation of the Object

While Canadian automatism focused its development of the accidental in terms of object, the automatism of the New York School emphasized the “tache” which, on the contrary, is a fragmentation of the object.

It isn't the accidental as such, or even its multiple possible relations, that make the experience of Pollock a new form of painting. Rather it is the particular quality of this tache when it is used in the dynamic space that Mondrian developed in spatial configuration.

In order to transcend three-dimensional space as maintained by cubism (and adopted by Surrealism), Mondrian wanted to destroy, after the volume, the plane, by introducing the idea of the dynamic plane. The latter would no longer exist as perspective and could no longer be positioned according to an analysis of light.

He expressed himself as follows: “The intention of cubism – in any case in the beginning – was to express volume. The three dimensional space (natural) remained thus established. It shows that cubism, *au fond*, remains natural and was only an abstraction, but not ABSTRACT. This was opposed to my concept of abstraction which emphasizes that THIS SPACE JUST HAS TO BE DESTROYED. In consequence I came to destroy volume by using the plane. Then the problem was to destroy the plane also. This I did by means of lines cutting across the planes. But still the plane remained too much intact. So I came only to lines and brought colour into them.”*

This is the reason there exists a defined development from Cézanne to Pollock consisting in the progressive destruction of volume and plane within the space of the painting. Mondrian, for his part, destroyed the plane-object locatable by light-analysis and he introduced the dynamic plane where colour rediscovers all its energetic possibilities.

The taches proposed in the painting of the New York School are no longer definable in relation to a light-analysis, which is still perspective (and which we still find in Canadian art), but they are situated in terms of colour-energy. And their reciprocal relationships create an energetic, non-Euclidian space in which there are infinite possibilities.

Whatever vocabulary an art form prefers in order to define itself, whether it be literary or artistic, it can only be valid in terms of the spatial composition it creates. It is the solution brought to the problem of colour-light that will define that space.

In summary, we have to stop remaking artwork that has already been made far too many times.

* Molinari is citing a well-known letter Mondrian wrote to James Johnson Sweeney that was published in *Art News* in the summer of 1951 (Singly, *Guido Molinari*, 60).

James A. Houston, from “In Search of Contemporary Eskimo Art,” 1952*

A splendid art of stone and ivory carving and delicate line engraving, equal to or excelling any native art on this continent, is found among the Eskimos of Canada's eastern Arctic. That these two Eskimo cultural groups, the coastal or seal people and the inland or caribou people, should be so creative is not surprising for they have always shown great ability in all the crafts they undertake.

Their slim kayaks are said to be the most perfectly devised water-craft in the world. Their clothing, made of caribou skins, is well tailored, and unsurpassed for warmth and comfort by any we have yet developed. The seal-oil lamp, the harpoon and fish spear are unique designs perfectly suited to the Eskimo's requirements [...]

The Eskimo still uses his primitive methods in carving. A bow drill is employed to make holes. The ivory mouth-piece steadies the revolving drill shaft while the carver holds the object in his free hand. He attains the carving's smooth shape with a rough stone and stone dust, and its polish by submerging it in seal oil. Later he rubs it to a fine finish with his hands.

Files are now used, but when these are not available, the Eskimo readily returns to the old ways.

The complete adoption of our methods will probably not improve the art of the Eskimos, as their simple tools force them to study the raw materials and best utilize their natural shape. Infinite care and patience are shown. Like the Chinese, they keep their small objects wrapped away, instead of on constant display, until they are passed to a guest for inspection. For this reason, we find all the parts (such as the pads of bears' paws) carefully carved in detail.

The Eskimo never has wasted his energies on warfare, and the climate demands that he spend a considerable amount of time inside his home. Thus, he has the opportunity to perfect his art.

Of course, I had no knowledge of this when I first visited the Arctic in 1948. But my thoughts were filled with the north, and I had long had a desire to draw the Eskimo in his true surroundings. I boarded a train in August which took me as far as the rails would carry me – to Moosonee on the southern tip of James Bay. There I had the outrageous good luck to be offered a plane trip to Port Harrison and Povungnetuk on the east coast of Hudson Bay.

I had the best time imaginable. The Eskimo carver is inspired with the coming of each new season, and by the migration of game. In some subtle way it is thought good luck to carve the animal one is about to hunt. You can feel the excitement of the search for walrus, of the seal hunt, of the coming of the geese,

* James A. Houston, from “In Search of Contemporary Eskimo Art,” *Canadian Art* 9, no. 3 (spring 1952): 99–104.



Fig. 8.13

Photograph taken in Pangnirtung, Nunavut. Left to right: Leah Qaqqasiq, Taina Nowdlak, James Houston, Levi Nutaralaaq, Joanasie Maniapik, Sheepa Ishulutaq, Rosie Veevee, Miluqtuarjuk Arnaqquq, Towkie Qappik. Possibly 1951 (Graburn, "The Discovery of Inuit Art," 4). Photo by Wilf Doucette. National Film Board of Canada, A-189969, Library and Archives Canada.

In 2002 Library and Archives Canada began an initiative called Project Naming with the intent of identifying for their communities the thousands of Aboriginal and northern people who are represented in their collection's photographs. When this photograph was published in the 1987 article mentioned above, the caption had simply read "Jim Houston showing Inuit at Pangnirtung in 1951 the first travelling exhibition of Inuit art."

of the salmon run in the rivers, by looking at the carvings as they come in. One month there will be an abundance of geese, the next month of walrus, and so on. The fatness or the leanness or the agility of the animal is in each instance depicted with the concentration of a carver whose whole mind is focussed on his future food supply. There is no copying of one another in this work.

A month later I returned with my drawings, but more important I had some splendid carvings in stone, made by the Eskimos.

The Canadian Handicrafts Guild suggested that I might make a test purchase for them the following summer.* The object was to find out whether the Eskimos on the east coast of the Bay could produce carvings in quantity and of a quality that would be saleable.

Once the Eskimos fully understood that we wanted to trade cartridges, tea and so forth, for all their work, they went at this new industry excitedly. They were paid by means of a system of chits through the facilities of the Hudson's Bay Company, and soon the allotment of money was used up.

When a sale of the Eskimo work was held that fall in Montreal it was advertised by the Guild to last a week but to our delight, everything was sold out in three days!

The Department of Resources and Development became interested in the project, and asked the Guild to extend its search for material even further north.† They stressed the need for work in areas that were depressed because of the scarcity of game and offered the Guild a small grant to cover my salary and travelling expenses.

Five trips have been made thus far. Points on the east and west coasts of Hudson Bay have been visited. Hudson Bay Company post managers are continuing to purchase Eskimo handicrafts at those places where I have spent some time on behalf of the Guild.

Over twenty thousand pieces have been brought out, and sold by the Guild to the Canadian public. The supply has not begun to meet the demand.

We are aware of the many pitfalls in the mass production of this type of art. The Guild does not wish greatly to increase the volume, or in any way change the methods Eskimos now use in their carving. We are aware of the Eskimos' proud sense of individualism, and employ the method of purchasing all of their work – paying larger sums for the better work. We are also much interested in children's work and encourage them by purchasing everything they make, even although we are sometimes only able to offer them a very small price. This has proved fruitful; for in some cases children of fifteen years, after a few months of practice, turn out work that compares favourably with the adult art.

The good carver is rarely the good hunter in any Eskimo group. The purchase of carvings, therefore, often improves and sometimes stimulates whole families – and gives them a new standing in their community.

It is perhaps an interesting insight into Eskimo character that the truly gifted carver, when he brings a piece to trade, will greatly malign his art. He will say that he is a worthless carver, and that nothing should be traded for his work.

* To read the fascinating letters exchanged between the Guild and the Hudson's Bay Company about this, see Virginia Watt, "In Retrospect," *Inuit Art Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (fall 1987): 18–20.

† Virginia Watt wrote about and published letters from this involvement too: "In Retrospect," *Inuit Art Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (spring 1988): 27–9, and "In Retrospect," *Inuit Art Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (winter 1990): 39–40.

When the slip is given in trade, he will put it away carelessly in his parka. Yet not one has ever been lost. And if the price paid is good, he will most certainly have another carving when you next see him.

The work of Eskimo women is an important part of this development. They produce objects of rare design and beauty, utilizing all their skill in needlework and in the blending of furs. In its own way, this work of Eskimo women is unparalleled in Canada.

In this first step into industry, we find the Canadian Eskimo clever and energetic. He is delighted with the opportunity to improve his living (and to avoid the necessity of Government relief), through the creation of art. Over seventy-five percent of those in any of the groups we have yet met take an active part in producing saleable work. Certainly this is Canada's liveliest art group.

Their recent work has been shown this year at the Royal Ontario Museum and at the National Gallery of Canada. It is our greatest hope that in the future names like Munamee, Akeektashook, Kopeekolok, Tikketuk, Tungeelik, Oshweetuk, and those of many other fine carvers, will be well known to all Canadians.

Marshall McLuhan, from "Notes on the Media as Art Forms," 1954*

The use of the term 'mass media' has been unfortunate. All media, especially languages, are mass media so far at least as their range in space and time is concerned. If by 'mass media' is meant a mechanized mode of a previous communication channel, then printing is the first of the mass media. Press, telegraph, wireless, telephone, gramophone, movie, radio, TV, are mutations of the mechanization of writing, speech, gesture. Insofar as mechanization introduces the 'mass' dimension, it may refer to a collective effort in the use of the medium, to larger audiences or to instantaneity of reception. Again, all of these factors may create a difficulty of 'feedback' or lack of rapport between 'speaker' and audience. There has been very little discussion of any of these questions, thanks to the gratuitous assumption that communication is a matter of transmission of information, message or idea. This assumption blinds people to the aspect of communication as participation in a common situation. And it leads to ignoring the *form* of communication as the basic art situation which is more significant than the information or idea 'transmitted.'

At many levels, printing established a divorce between 'literature and life' which was scarcely heard of before printing and which is meaningless today when print is recessive, on one hand, or mainly pictorial in impact, on the other.

* Marshall McLuhan, from "Notes on the Media as Art Forms," *Explorations* 2 (April 1954): 6-13. By permission of the Estate of Marshall McLuhan.



Fig. 8.14

Cover of *Explorations* no. 2, 1954. Cover image © Estates of Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan and used with their permission.

The well-established view of culture which assumes that it filters down from *elites* to popular levels will not stand up for a moment to the facts of linguistic history and formation. Yet language is the great collective work of art transcending all individual works. Today this naive content-view of culture prevents us from directing serious critical attention to the media, old and new, as art forms. It is a charley horse inhibiting all education in a technological society [...]

As Erasmus was the first to grasp the character of the revolution of the printing-press, James Joyce was the first to exploit the multiple revolution of telegraph,

press, radio, cinema, and TV. *Finnegans Wake* has already begun to appear as an orchestration of all the media of communication, ancient and modern. And it was his mastery of the art process in terms of the stages of apprehension that enabled Joyce to install himself in the centre of the creative process. Whether it appears as mere individual sensation, as collective hope or phobia, as national myth-making or cultural norm-functioning, there is Joyce with cocked ear, eye and nose at the centre of the action. He saw that the change of our time (“wait till Finnegans wakes!”) was occurring as a result of the shift from superimposed myth to awareness of the character of the creative process itself. Here was the only hope for a world culture which would incorporate all previous achievements. The very process of human communication, Joyce saw, would afford the natural base for all the future operations and strategies of culture. Towards this vivisectional spectacle of the human community in action we have been led ever more swiftly in recent decades by increasing self-consciousness of the processes and effects of the various media of communication. Our knowledge of the modes of consciousness in pre-literate societies together with our sense of the processes of culture formation in many literate societies past and present, have sharpened our perceptions and led to wide agreement that communication itself is the common ground for the study of individual and society. To this study Joyce contributed not just awareness but demonstration of individual cognition as the analogue and matrix of all communal actions, political, linguistic and sacramental.

What Erasmus saw was that the printed book was to revolutionize education. He saw that the book gave new scope and power to the classroom. What we have to see is that the new media have created classrooms without walls. Just as power technology has abolished ‘nature’ in the old sense and brought the globe within the scope of art, so the new media have transformed the entire environment into an educational affair.

Concentrating briefly on one aspect of photography as it revolutionized painting technique as well as the conditions for contemplation of art, Andre Malraux came up with his news of ‘museums-without-walls.’ The main force making in that direction he saw was the clarification of the painter’s medium itself. The canvas gradually freed from anecdote and narrative became in our time not a vehicle but sheer expression. This was the heritage of Cézanne, whose concentration on one formal problem (“the realization of space by the juxtaposition of areas of pure color”) led to a break-through as spectacular as that of Planck and Einstein. But this discovery occurred simultaneously in poetry and music. And it enables us to see that each channel of expression (even press, radio, cinema) awaits a similar day of emancipation.

Notes

PREFACE

- 1 Sládek, "Between History and Fiction" (Sládek's italics).
- 2 Papastergiadis, *Cosmopolitanism and Culture*, 185.
- 3 On professionalism and Native art, see Huneault, "Professionalism as Critical Concept and Historical Process," and Racette, "I Want to Call Their Names in Resistance."
- 4 Moray, "Exhibiting Carr," 280.
- 5 Vigneault, *Identité et modernité*, 133.
- 6 Nurse, "Gendering the Artistic Field," 26ff (quote on page 26).
- 7 Ibid., 32.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 *Ottawa Citizen*, 19 April 1930.

I LAWREN HARRIS, EUROPE, AND THE BODHISATTV A IN THE NEXT ROOM

- Epigraph: Bertram Brooker, diary excerpt, 26 August 1925, Bertram Brooker Papers, box 1, folder 16; quoted in Ann Davis, *The Logic of Ecstasy*, 60–1.
- 1 Lawren Harris, biography sent to Katherine Dreier for the November 1926 Société Anonyme exhibition, box 17, folder 472, Katherine S. Dreier papers / Société Anonyme archive.
 - 2 Betts, *Avant-Garde Canadian Literature*, 103.
 - 3 Especially Adamson, *Lawren S. Harris: Urban Scenes and Wilderness Landscapes*, and Reid, *Atma Buddhi Manas*; and most recently and fully by Larisey in *Light for a Cold Land*, 52–68; also Ambler, "Lawren Harris: A Theosophist Who Painted."
 - 4 "Introduction by Northrop Frye," *Lawren Harris*, ix.
 - 5 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 299.
 - 6 Ibid., 351.
 - 7 Larisey, *Light for a Cold Land*, 47.
 - 8 Harris, "Revelation of Art in Canada," *Canadian Theosophist* 7, no. 5 (15 July 1926): 85 and 86.
 - 9 E.g., McKay, *Picturing the Land*, 198, and Dawn, *National Visions, National Blindness*, 300–4. For a balanced overview of theosophy and racism, see McCann, *Vanguard of the New Age*, 69–76.

- 10 Harris, "Revelation of Art in Canada," 87.
- 11 Ibid., 87.
- 12 See in particular Nasgaard, *The Mystic North*, and Davis, "A Study in Modernism."
- 13 McCann, *Vanguard of the New Age*, 63 and passim.
- 14 Nash, "Geo-centric Education and Anti-Imperialism," 400–2 (quotes on 402 and 400).
- 15 Cousins, 1918, quoted in Nash, "Geo-centric Education," 403.
- 16 McCann, "A New Dharma," chapter 4.
- 17 Ibid., especially 247–9; see also Lacombe, "Theosophy and the Canadian Idealist Tradition," 107ff.
- 18 Vipond, "The Nationalist Network."
- 19 Cook, "Landscape Painting and National Sentiment in Canada," 276–7.
- 20 Letter from Dreier to Harris, 26 August 1926, Katherine S. Dreier papers / Société Anonyme archive. For Dreier's career, see John David Angeline, "Reassessing Modernism." Harris's painting *Ontario Hill Town* (1926) is in the University of Toronto Art Centre Collection.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Introduction, *The Société Anonyme and the Dreier Bequest*, 8–10.
- 23 Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual*, 19.
- 24 Bell, *Art*; see also Larisey, *Light for a Cold Land*, 57.
- 25 Letter from Dreier to Harris, 19 November 1926, box 17, folder 472, Katherine S. Dreier papers / Société Anonyme archive.
- 26 Letter from Harris to Dreier, late November or early December 1926, box 17, folder 472, Katherine S. Dreier papers / Société Anonyme archive.
- 27 Letter from Harris to Dreier, December 1926, box 17, folder 472, Katherine S. Dreier papers / Société Anonyme archive.
- 28 Nash, "Geo-centric Education and Anti-Imperialism," 403, cited by McCann, *Vanguard of the New Age*, 79.
- 29 Letter from Harris to Dreier, late November/early December 1926, box 17, folder 472, Katherine S. Dreier papers / Société Anonyme archive.

- 30 Dreier, Introduction, *Catalogue of the Exhibition of the International Exhibition of Modern Art*, 3–4.
- 31 Letter from Doris Huestis Mills to Katherine Dreier, 22 April 1927, box 8, folder 1, Doris Heustis Mills Speirs Collection (emphasis in original letter).
- 32 Comfort, quoted in Gray, Rand, and Steen, *Charles Comfort*, 18.
- 33 Nasgaard, *Abstract Painting in Canada*, 95.
- 34 Pfaff, “Lawren Harris and the International Exhibition of Modern Art,” 81.
- 35 Dick, “Modern Art of Many Lands at Toronto Art Gallery: Distortion, Exaggeration and Ugliness Keynotes of the Exhibition,” *Saturday Night*, 16 April 1927.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Housser, “Art, the Initiator,” *Canadian Theosophist* 8, no. 2 (15 April 1927): 21–6 (quote on 24).
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Bell, *Art*, 60.
- 40 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 357.
- 41 Quoted in Ted G. Davy, “A Lawren Harris Class,” *Canadian Theosophist* 65, no. 4 (September–October 1984): 94 (quoted by Davy from December 1926 issue of the *Toronto Theosophical News*).
- 42 Larisey, *Light for a Cold Land*, 46. See also Larisey’s notes from the minute books of the Toronto Theosophical Society, 1909–1934, Roy Mitchell Fonds 1978-010/001, file 3.
- 43 Ambler, *Lawren Harris*.
- 44 “Science and the Soul,” *Canadian Theosophist* 12, no. 10 (December 1931): 298–300; “An Epitome of Europe” and “Theosophy and the Modern World: War and Europe,” *Canadian Theosophist* 14, no. 9 (15 November 1933): 281–8; “The Armaments Racket,” *Canadian Theosophist* 15, no. 4 (June 1934): 125–6; and three radio talks in late 1933, sponsored by the Toronto Theosophical Society and published later in the *Canadian Theosophist*: “Thought and Responsibility,” 66, no. 4 (September–October 1985): 73–6; “The Science of the Inner Facts of Life,” 67, no. 3 (July–August 1986): 49; and “Justice in Human Life,” 68, no. 1 (March–April 1987): 1–4.
- 45 Brooker, letter to L.L. Fitzgerald, 10 January 1932, box 1, folder 11, Bertram Brooker Papers.
- 46 Letter from Harris to Carr, n.d. [summer 1933], Emily Carr Papers.
- 47 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 359.
- 48 Ibid., 313.
- 49 Especially Albert Smythe, e.g., in *Canadian Theosophist* 14, no. 2 (1933): 52, cited in McCann, *Vanguard of the New Age*, 96–7.
- 50 Harris, “An Epitome of Europe,” *Canadian Theosophist* 14, no. 7 (15 September 1933): 220.
- 51 Jameson, *No Time Like the Present* (New York: Knopf, 1933), reviewed by Harris in “Theosophy and the Modern World: War and Europe,” 281–8. The series “Theosophy and the Modern World” was organized for the magazine by Fred Housser. On Theosophy and pacifism, especially concerning Albert Smythe, see McCann, “A New Dharma for the Nation,” 372–7, and “A Pilgrim Forever,” 193–8.
- 52 Harris, “War and Europe,” 281.
- 53 Ibid., 288.
- 54 Harris, “The Armaments Racket,” *Canadian Theosophist* 15, no. 6 (June 1934): 126.
- 55 Larisey, *Light for a Cold Land*, 60.
- 56 E.g., Harris, “An Epitome of Europe,” 219.
- 57 Hunter, in “Loomings (Cape Dorset, Los Angeles, Toronto, Brantford),” *The Idea of North*, 53.
- 58 Richard William Hill, “The Vacant Lot: Who’s Buying It?” 173.
- 59 Dennis Reid, “Lawren S. Harris’s *Self-Portrait*,” 95.
- 60 Letter from Mills to Katherine Dreier, 22 April 1927, Doris Heustis Mills Speirs Collection.
- 61 Ambler, “Lawren Harris,” 399–400. Ambler’s discussion of “Theosophy and Art” is on pages 267–9.
- 62 “Contrasted Styles in Canadian Art/Younger Painters Give Vigor to the Royal Canadian Academy/Cubist Painting/Results of Mural Competition for One Interesting Group,” *Mail and Empire* (Toronto), 26 December 1923.
- 63 See, e.g., Brown, “Canada’s National Painters”; Hill, “The National Gallery, A National Art, Critical Judgment and the State”; and Jessup, “Bushwhackers in the Gallery.”
- 64 Letter from Nicol to Charles Comfort, undated [1932–January 1933], Charles Fraser Comfort fonds, Correspondence – Additional Material 1932–1935.
- 65 Wyn Wood, “The National Gallery,” *Canadian Forum* 13, no. 150 (March 1933): 229.
- 66 Colin Eatlock, “Classical Music Criticism at the *Globe and Mail*: 1936–2000,” *Canadian University Music Review* 24, no. 2 (2004): 8–28; Don Sedgwick, “Lawrence Mason,” *Canadian*

- Encyclopedia*, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/lawrence-mason-emc/>; and Anton Wagner, "Dr Lawrence Mason, Music and Drama Critic 1924–1939," *Theatre Research in Canada / Recherches théâtrales au Canada* 4, no. 1 (spring 1983): 3–14.
- 67 Bohan, *The Société Anonyme's Brooklyn Exhibition*, 113.
- 68 *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*, ed. Lawrence Mason (Yale Shakespeare Series 1918), and *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, ed. Lawrence Mason (Yale Shakespeare Series 1919). Mason also published *The English Poems, Now First Collected from Various Sources and Edited by Lawrence Mason* (Yale, 1914); *An Anglo-Saxon Genesis: Genesis A. Translated from the Old English by Lawrence Mason; Illustrations from the Manuscript*, Yale Studies in English 48 (New York: Holt, 1915); *Tower of Ivory* (by Archibald MacLeish), with a foreword by Lawrence Mason (Yale, 1917), and a number of articles in philology and literature journals.
- 69 Lois Kerr Reynolds, letter to Anton Wagner, 22 June 1982, cited in Wagner, "Dr. Lawrence Mason," 5.
- 70 Johnston, "Modern Art and Aesthetic Reactions: An Objection," *Canadian Forum* (Toronto) 7, no. 80 (May 1927): 241.
- 71 Hunter, *Lawren Stewart Harris: A Painter's Progress*, 61–2.
- 2 DISCOVERING DAVID MILNE**
- Epigraph: Letter from Milne to James Clarke, 27 March 1930, vol. 2, David Brown Milne fonds, Library and Archives Canada.
- 1 Brooker, *Ottawa Citizen*, 19 April 1930.
- 2 Letter from Milne to James Clarke, 14–28 June 1934, vol. 3, David Brown Milne fonds, Library and Archives Canada.
- 3 Background information on Vincent and Alice Massey is from Claude Bissell's two-volume biography *The Young Vincent Massey and The Imperial Canadian*.
- 4 Finlay, *The Force of Culture*, 4–5.
- 5 Letter from Alice Massey to David Milne, 28 March 1932; letter from Milne to Alice Massey, 1 April 1932; letter from Alice Massey to Milne, 16 January 1933; letter from Milne to Alice Massey, 17 January 1933: box 376, file 17, Papers of Alice Massey.
- 6 Letter from Milne to Alice and Vincent Massey, 20 August 1934, box 585, file 01, Vincent Massey Personal Records; O'Brian, *David Milne*, 42.
- 7 Gagnon, "Milne and Abstraction," 132.
- 8 Letter from Milne to Clarke, 3 October 1932, Library and Archives Canada.
- 9 Bice, "Creative Courage," 114.
- 10 Especially letter from Milne to McCurry, 19 March 1931, National Gallery of Canada Library & Archives.
- 11 Letter from Alice Massey to Milne, 3 October 1934, box 376, file 16, Papers of Alice Massey.
- 12 *David B. Milne: Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings*, 2:304, 591.
- 13 Jarvis, *David Milne*, 3.
- 14 The most comprehensive account of reviews for this period is within the bibliography published in *David B. Milne: Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings*, 2:1109–42.
- 15 Letter from Vincent Massey to Milne, 13 October 1934, box 376, file 17, Vincent Massey Personal Records.
- 16 Letter from Milne to Alice Massey, 19 December 1934, box 376, file 16, Papers of Alice Massey.
- 17 Buchanan, "An Artist Who Lives in the Woods," *Saturday Night* (Toronto), 1 December 1934.
- 18 Wells, "Art and Artists: A Toast to a Painter and the Woods He Paints – The Story of a Man Who Had the Courage to Answer the Call of the Wilds," *Toronto Telegram*, 24 November 1934.
- 19 Letter from Milne to Alice Massey, 19 December 1934.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 P. McC. (Pearl McCarthy), "Unique Landscapes at Local Gallery / Work of D.B. Milne, Seldom Exhibited, Given High Praise," *Mail and Empire* (Toronto), 28 November 1934.
- 22 McInnes, "The World of Art," *Saturday Night*, 8 June 1935.
- 23 Letter from Milne to McInnes, 16 February 1938, David Brown Milne fonds, Library and Archives Canada.
- 24 Letter from McInnes to Milne, 12 January 1937, David Brown Milne fonds, AGO.
- 25 A.H.J. [Alan Jarvis], "Art, Music and Drama: Art Gallery," *Varsity*, University of Toronto, 5 December 1934.
- 26 Jarvis, in *Douglas Duncan: A Memorial Portrait*, 11.
- 27 Letter from Milne to Jarvis, 18 December 1937, Letters to Alan Jarvis, box 2, file 5, David Brown Milne fonds, AGO.

- 28 Letter from Duncan to Milne, 13 June 1937, box 3, file 1, David Brown Milne fonds, AGO.
- 29 Reid, "The Canadian Watercolours," 129.
- 30 Nurse, "Gendering the Artistic Field," 26.
- 31 Repentigny, "David Milne: une autre injustice réparée," *La Presse* (Montreal), 4 February 1956.
- 32 Frye, "Lawren Harris: An Introduction," ix.
- 33 McInnes, "Contemporary Canadian Artists, No. 9 – David B. Milne," *Canadian Forum* 17, no. 201 (October 1937): 238.
- 34 McInnes, *Finding a Father*, 106–9.
- 35 McInnes, "The World of Art," *Saturday Night*, 8 June 1935.
- 36 Huot, "L'aventure artistique du peintre de Saint-Denis Garneau"; also, many examples of Saint-Denis Garneau's painting are online at www.saintdenysgarneau.com.
- 3 EMILY CARR AND THE WORDLESS SPEECH OF THINGS
- Epigraph: Carr, journal entry, 10 November 1927.
- 1 Carr, journal entry, 16 July 1933.
- 2 Shadbolt, Introduction, *The Emily Carr Omnibus*, 12.
- 3 Nurse, "Gendering the Artistic Field," 26.
- 4 Ibid., 30–32.
- 5 Carr, journal entry, 23 November 1930.
- 6 Many efforts have been made, by both Native and non-Native scholars, to right the wrongs of the 1927 show. Marcia Crosby's 1991 essay "Construction of the Imaginary Indian" was at the origin of many of these efforts. See also Crosby's "T'emlax'am: An Ada'ox." Other major sources of information about this exhibition and about Carr's use of Indian subjects are Moray, *Unsettling Encounters*; Crean, *The Laughing One*; Jessup, "Canadian Artists, Railways, the State and 'The Business of Becoming a Nation'"; Moray, "Emily Carr and the Traffic in Native Images"; Morrison, "Canadian Art and Cultural Appropriation"; an early critique by Carr's friend Edythe Hembroff-Schleicher, "Emily and the Indians," in *Emily Carr: The Untold Story*, 93–105; Johanne Lamoreux, "The Other French Modernity of Emily Carr"; Steer, "Canadian Art According to Emily Carr"; and Braun, "Colonialism's Afterlife: Vision and Visuality on the Northwest Coast."
- 7 Carr, journal entry, 5 December 1927.
- 8 Carr, journal entry, 1 February 1931.
- 9 Carr, journal entry, 28 January 1931.
- 10 Carr, journal entry, 18 February 1934.
- 11 Carr, "Modern and Indian Art of the West Coast," *Supplement to the McGill News* 21, no. 9 (June 1929): 18–19.
- 12 Carr, *Klee Wyck*, 52.
- 13 "Indian Art of the West Coast"; also, lecture given at the Provincial Normal School, Victoria, 22 October 1935, Emily Carr Papers.
- 14 See Bear and Crean, "The Presentation of Self in Emily Carr's Writings," *Emily Carr: New Perspectives*, 62–71.
- 15 Carr, journal entry, 24 August 1930.
- 16 Hunter, "Emily Carr: Clear Cut," *Emily Carr: New Perspectives*, 202–7 (quote on 202).
- 17 Carr, journal entry, 8 December 1936.
- 18 Carr, *Growing Pains, Emily Carr Omnibus*, 460.
- 19 Carr, journal entry, 12 November 1932.
- 20 Carr, journal entries of 3 November 1932, 2 December 1932 (twice), and 29 January 1934.
- 21 Carr, journal entry, 2 December 1932.
- 22 Carr, journal entry, 7 September 1933.
- 23 Carr, journal entry, 12 December 1933.
- 24 Carr, journal entry, 14 July 1931.
- 25 Carr, journal entry, 24 August 1930.
- 26 E.g., James Jennings, *Christ in You* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1919), mentioned in the 28 September 1931 journal entry.
- 27 E.g., journal entries May [date illegible] 1931, 14 July 1931, 27 November 1932.
- 28 Blanchard, *Life of Emily Carr*, 227.
- 29 Carr, journal entry, 16 January 1934.
- 30 Carr, journal entry, 25 January 1934.
- 31 Carr, journal entry, 29 January 1934.
- 32 Blanchard, *Life of Emily Carr*, 228.
- 33 Carr, journal entry, 29 January 1934.
- 34 Carr, journal entry, 19 July 1935.
- 35 Carr, "Some Freedom, Some Religion," in *This and That*, 161. Clem Davies is first mentioned in Carr's journals on 22 April 1934.
- 36 Carr, journal entry, 14 October 1933. On movement in a picture: entries of 26 March 1934, 4 April 1934, 24 April 1934, 3 May 1934, 16 June 1934, 16 November 1935.
- 37 Shadbolt, interview by Charles Hill.
- 38 DeSoto, *Emily Carr*, 169.
- 39 Davis, "Emily Carr's Mystic Soul," 13.
- 40 Carr, journal entry, 17 January 1936.
- 41 Berlin, *Roots of Romanticism*, 117–20.
- 42 Carr, journal entry, 6 April 1934.
- 43 Carr, journal entry, 31 May 1935.
- 44 Carr, journal entry, 28 December 1933; on Annie Besant, *Karma*, 1st ed. (Adyar, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1895).

- 45 Letter from Carr to Dilworth, last week of December 1942 (in *Corresponding Influence*, 142–3).
- 46 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 351.
- 47 Carr, journal entry, 15 November 1927.
- 48 Carr, journal entry, 14 April 1937.
- 49 Hembroff-Schleicher, *Emily Carr*, 86.
- 50 Carr, *Growing Pains*, especially the chapter entitled “Lawren Harris.”
- 51 Carr, journal entry, 31 January 1931.
- 52 Letter from Carr to Dilworth, 5 April 1942.
- 53 King, *Inward Journey*, 205.
- 54 Hembroff-Schleicher, *Emily Carr*, 10.
- 4 THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR AND THE MORAL DUTY OF ARTISTS**
- Epigraph: Dorothy Livesay, “Canadian Poetry and the Spanish Civil War,” paper presented at York University Toronto, 1976; in Livesay, *Right Hand, Left Hand*, 255.
- 1 David Arnason, introduction to Dorothy Livesay, *Right Hand Left Hand*, n.p.
- 2 For instance, Charles Hill’s indispensable *Canadian Painting in the Thirties* and Esther Trépanier’s *Peinture et modernité au Québec, 1919–1939*, also indispensable; and more recently, Kirk Niergarth’s “*The Dignity of Every Human Being*.”
- 3 Underhill, “United Front,” in “Notes and Comments,” *Canadian Forum* 15, no. 181 (February 1936): 5.
- 4 Spry, “The C.C.F. Party in Its Formative Years,” *The Great Depression*, 217.
- 5 Edgar Main (pseudonym of Leo Kennedy), “A Cartoonist of the Left,” *Canadian Forum* 15, no. 177 (August 1935): 347.
- 6 Marx, preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 11–12.
- 7 Paul Kelly, “Art and Criticism: A Marxian Interpretation,” *Canadian Forum* 13, no. 152 (May 1933): 294–7 (quote on 295).
- 8 Trépanier, “Modernité et conscience sociale,” 87; Trépanier, “La modernité artistique au Québec avant les ruptures ‘avant-gardistes,’” 7–21.
- 9 Livesay, *Journey with My Selves*, 83 and 156–7.
- 10 Rifkind, *Comrades and Critics*, 73.
- 11 Mayerovitch, quoted in Lou Seligson, “Harry Mayerovitch: A Jack-of-All-Trades,” *Canadian Jewish News* (Montreal edition), 28 July 1988.
- 12 Trépanier, “Les carnets de dessins de Marian Dale Scott,” 96–7.
- 13 Rifkind, *Comrades and Critics*, 20–1.
- 14 Forsyth, “Communists, Class, and Culture in Canada,” 46–8.
- 15 Letter from Pegi Nicol to Marian Scott, [1936], Personal Correspondence, file 8, box 20, Marian Scott Fonds.
- 16 Clarkson, *Norman Bethune*, 88–95.
- 17 Peck, *Red Moon over Spain*, 9.
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5 DEFENDING ART VIVANT

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6 THE WAR AND THE NEW CULTURAL ORDER

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7 THE AUTOMATISTES, TRUE POETS

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8 COLD WAR CULTURE

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PERIODICALS TO 1960

This briefly annotated list includes Canadian magazines and journals that either carried important articles on modern art or contributed substantially to the background for this book.

All the articles quoted or reprinted from these periodicals, and there are a great many, are cited in full in the book's endnotes, but not in the bibliography that follows this list.

Only a few newspapers are listed here. Reviews and articles from these and other newspapers are cited in full in the endnotes.

Acta Victoriana, 1878–. Victoria College, University of Toronto (now Victoria University). Literary journal.

L'Action Nationale, 1933–. Montreal, Ligue d'action nationale. Reflected the far-right, anti-federalist perspective of its publisher and the view of the conservative French Canadian elite of the thirties and forties.

Amérique Française, 1941–64. Montreal. Literary journal that promoted modern Quebec writers before turning conservative in the fifties.

Arts et Pensée, 1951–5. Montreal. Journal of the arts for a broad audience of intellectuals.

L'Autorité, 1913–55. Montreal. Important for anti-clerical, anti-conformist views.

The Beaver, 1920–. Winnipeg, Hudson's Bay Company. Articles on Native art and culture in the north in the fifties. Acquired by Canada's National History Society in 1994 and renamed *Canada's History* in 2010.

Bridle and Golfer, 1930–1940s? Toronto. A socialite's magazine; some articles on artists.

Cahiers d'Essai, 1958–[61]. Montreal. Supported contemporary arts in Montreal.

Le Canada, 1903–54. Montreal. Liberal newspaper.

Canadian Art, 1943–83. Published by the Society for Arts Publications. Canada's first national art magazine; superseded *Maritime Art*. Edited by Walter Abell until 1945. Name changed to *artscanada* in 1967 and published under that name until the Society for Arts Publications ended in 1983.

Canadian Bookman, 1919–98 (*Canadian Author and Bookman* from 1943–92, then *Canadian Author*).

Toronto, Canadian Authors' Association. "Devoted to literature and the creative arts." Anglo-Canadian nationalist perspective.

Canadian Comment, 1932–38. Toronto. Current affairs and culture.

Canadian Forum, 1920–2000. Toronto. Social-democratic journal of political and cultural opinion that published some of the best English Canadian art criticism of the thirties. Little material on art during the Second World War and afterwards.

Canadian Geographical Journal, 1930–78. Published in Ottawa by the Royal Canadian Geographical Society.

The Canadian Magazine, Toronto, 1893–1939.

General-interest magazine for the educated reader.

Canadian Review of Music and Art, 1942–48.

Toronto. Bilingual cultural magazine with articles on Toronto artists. Absorbed by *Northern Review*.

The Canadian Theosophist 1920–98. Calgary, Toronto, and other cities. Organ of the Theosophical Society in Canada. In its early years, it reflected the interconnections among post-First World War nationalism, art, and the spiritual in English Canada, especially in the writings of Lawren Harris.

Cité Libre, 1950–66. Montreal. Political and cultural review important in the fifties, the last decade of the Duplessis regime in Quebec, for promoting anti-conformism and free speech.

Le Clairon de Sainte-Hyacinthe, 1912–54. Liberal.

Le Clairon-Montréal, 1946–49. Liberal.

Combat, 1946–54. Montreal. A leftist labour newspaper with which certain of the Automatistes had ties.

Le Devoir, 1910–. Montreal. Newspaper.

En Masse, March–October 1945. Montreal. Leftist arts and literary magazine in four numbers.

Explorations, 1953–59. Toronto, University of Toronto Press. "Studies in culture and communication." Product of the collaboration of Marshall McLuhan and the anthropologist Edmund Carpenter. Reprinted (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016).

Federation of Canadian Artists Bulletin (Bulletin – Federation of Canadian Artists), 1942–46?

Les Gants du Ciel, 1943–46. Montreal, Fides. A periodical of Montreal's *chrétiens de gauche*.

- The Gazette*, Montreal. Founded 1778 as a French-language newspaper; briefly bilingual; then English only from 1822.
- Le Haut-Parleur*, 1950–53. Replaced *Clairon-Montréal*. Merged with *L'Autorité* 1953. Promoted free thought in the Duplessis era. Column by Claude Gauvreau 1950–51; Charles Doyon was also a regular writer.
- Here and Now*, 1947–49. Toronto. Literary magazine in four numbers, with articles on art.
- L'Information Médicale et Paramédicale*, 1948–80. Montreal. Medical journal that added arts pages as it expanded. Many extended reviews of Montreal exhibitions.
- Le Jour*, 1937–46. Montreal. Liberal political-literary magazine founded by Jean-Charles Harvey, with art criticism by Charles Doyon and others.
- Le Journal Musical Canadien*, 1954–61. Montreal. The artist Pierre Gauvreau had an art column from November 1954 to June 1956.
- Journal – Royal Architectural Institute of Canada*, 1924–59. Toronto, RAIC. Regular art reviews in the thirties, especially of Royal Canadian Academy exhibitions.
- Liberté*, 1959–2009. Montreal literary and cultural review. Vol. 4, no. 22 (April 1962) has Borduas's letters to Claude Gauvreau, pp. 230–51.
- Maclean's*, 1911–. Toronto. Popular magazine with occasional articles on art.
- Mail and Empire*, 1895–1936 (*Daily Mail and Empire* to 1929). Toronto. A conservative newspaper. In 1936, merged with *The Globe* to form *The Globe and Mail*.
- Manitoba Arts Review*, 1938–59. Winnipeg, University of Manitoba. Continued by *Arts Review* 1962–65.
- Maritime Art*, 1940–43. Published by the Maritime Art Association in Wolfville, NS, and then Halifax. Wartime art magazine; English Canadian and nationalist. First fifteen issues included original prints by Canadian artists. Superseded by *Canadian Art*.
- Mayfair*, Toronto 1927–36 and Montreal 1937–59. Culture and fashion for the English Canadian socialite. In the fifties, substantial numbers of articles on modern art, and covers by Canadian artists.
- Montrealer*, 1926–70. Montreal. Elite society, fashion/home, and literary magazine. John Lyman had an art column 1936–40.
- The New Frontier*, 1936–37. Toronto. “A monthly magazine of literature and social criticism.” Communist/United Front ideology. Reproductions of works by Canadian artists and articles on relation of arts to society.
- New Frontiers*, 1952–56. Toronto. A Marxist-nationalist magazine.
- Northern Review* 1945–56. Toronto. Literary magazine with articles on arts. Resulted from merger of *Preview* and *First Statement*.
- Notre Temps*, 1945–62. Montreal. A somewhat conservative social and cultural weekly.
- Nouvelle Revue Canadienne*, 1951–56. Ottawa. A literary magazine with articles on art.
- Opinions*, 1929–34. Montreal. Official organ of Association des Anciens Étudiants d'Europe.
- La Patrie*, 1879–1978. Montreal. Liberal. Daily to 1957, then weekly.
- Le Petit Journal*, 1926–78. Montreal. An illustrated popular weekly.
- Place Publique (Les Cahiers de la Place Publique)*, 1951–52. Boucherville, Quebec. Art, science, literature, philosophy.
- La Presse*, 1884–. Montreal. Daily newspaper.
- Preview*. 1942–45. Montreal. Literary magazine. Merged with *First Statement* to form *Northern Review*.
- Le Quartier Latin*, 1919–77. The student newspaper of the University of Montreal, and in the forties one of the most important publications in the city for *art vivant*. A special supplement, “La peinture canadienne,” edited by Guy Viau, appeared on 17 December 1943.
- Queen's Quarterly*, 1893–. Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario. Scholarly quarterly with some art writings.
- Regards*, 1940–2. Quebec. Literary and cultural review.
- Relations*, 1941–. Montreal. Jesuit.
- La Relève*, 1934–41, and its successor *La Nouvelle Relève*, 1941–48. Montreal. Liberal Catholic. Provided a critique of traditionalist political-clerical values in Quebec.
- Revue Dominicaine*, 1895–1961. Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec. Published by the Dominican Fathers. Editorial direction changed constantly, but during the forties questioned conservatism of French Canadian establishment with articles by Marie-Alain Couturier and others.
- La Revue Moderne*, 1919–60. Montreal. Light literary review with substantial attention to art.
- La Revue Populaire*, 1907–63. Montreal. Popular magazine with specifically French Canadian content; became a women's magazine after Second World War.
- Saturday Night*, 1911–2005. Toronto. Pro-business weekly for much of its run, with an arts section.
- The Standard* (Montreal), 1905–51. Newspaper.

The Star, 1892– (originally *The Evening Star*, then the *Toronto Daily Star*; in 1971, renamed the *Toronto Star*). Toronto. Newspaper.

Supplement to the McGill News, 1926–30. Montreal: Graduates' Society of McGill University. Supplement to the university's newspaper with articles of interest to a general readership.

Technique: Revue de Formation Professionnelle, 1926–69. Published in Quebec and other cities by the Service d'Information du Ministère de l'Éducation.

Toronto Telegram (originally the *Evening Telegram*), 1876–1971. A conservative paper in rivalry with the more liberal *Star*.

The Undergraduate (*Undergrad*), University of Toronto, 1931–69. Magazine. Preceded by *University College Magazine*.

University of Toronto Quarterly, 1931–. University quarterly specializing in the humanities.

Vie des Arts, 1956–. Montreal. Intended to pick up where *Arts et Pensée* ended, but aimed at a wider audience. Focus on Quebec art.

Wall News, 1944–45. Ottawa: Wartime Information Board. Broadsheet.

World Affairs 1936?–70. Toronto. Published a wartime series of articles on Canadian artists.

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